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GLOBAL EVOLUTION

BOOK 02

Dog Bite

EPUB CREATION BY LISA HAYES

Global Evolution

(全球进化)

by

Dog Bite

(咬狗)

Synopsis

Cambrian Big Bang, now the largest life science puzzle...

500 million years ago, single-celled life on Earth suddenly occurred mutation similar to evolution, a variety of gorgeous creatures was born “out of the thin air”, all ancestors of today’s species appeared in that short period of time, each species were evolving at a lightning speed billion times faster than today, it was a brilliant era.

Unfortunately, the life of brilliant things are always short, after the brief “Cambrian”, life on Earth entered another 56 million years of evolutionary era at turtle speed. And humans, was also one step faster during the turtle race, and become the leader of life on Earth.

But now — a greater “second age” has come again.

During the lightning speed of evolution, humanity was kicked off of the throne on the food chain in the shortest time possible, and life on Earth, welcomed the second brilliant big bang.

The real end of the world, is no longer brainless zombies or desolate earth, but — the end of mankind, the whole earth’s paradise.

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Chapter 101: Zhizhi He

“Ten, he is a ten!” Jing reacted instantly.

“Thanks!” Chang took out a small pistol that he had collected and kept from a dead soldier. He fired twice at the EM with each bullet hitting one of the knees, which resulted in him immediately kneeling on the ground. Chang shouted out, “Stay still and stay silence!”

Zhizhi happened to see this when she walked in.

“Good call! Subduing them without force.”

“I am not fighting against them anyways.” Chang was still holding the pistol, his eyes browsing among the girls to find a face that he was familiar with. He asked her then, “Where is my worm box?”

“They hid it.” The girl pointed at the muscular EM.

His hands weren’t shaking at all, and his eyes not blinking. Chang walked up to the hard-bodied man. “Where is my worm box?”

“What worm box?”

“Don’t fool with me, the box that contains numerous tiny white

worms that are edible.” Chang pressed the muzzle on the EM’s temple. “Don’t play stupid, even though your evolution is far more advanced than others’, you can’t take a shot with the pistol pressed to your head. Your head will explode, and your brain will splash about. But I didn’t come here to fight, I just need my worm box back.”

The facial expressions of the men changed, and their tight-pressed lips loosened once they heard what Chang came for. One of them even raised his hand, showing that he was willing to bring Chang to the worm box.

It was rather easy for them to find the worm box as it was only hid in a cabinet that stood against the wall. Chang immediately opened the worm box when he got his hand on it.

If the base number of the worms was reduced, the production efficiency would be reduced as well. Seeing less than half of the worms slowly wriggling in the box, Chang was greatly upset.

“You ate quite a lot, didn’t you?” Chang furrowed his brows.

“I didn’t eat them all, you see, we also have girls living with us. Our lives aren’t as easy as you thought.” The man tried to ingratiate himself with Chang as he saw’s Chang’s disappointment. “We ain’t having it easy, either. We’re just trying to have some fun.”

“I don’t care what your lives are. I’m just here for my box. Now that I lost more than half of my worms, you need to pay me back

for my loss.” Chang smiled, his eyes shone with greed as he urgently wanted some other weapons in exchange for food.

However, the man misunderstood him.

“Bro, I see what you mean. Do you like any of our girls? Just take whoever you like. They’re all obedient, I’ve wiped out those naughty ones.”

“You killed them?” Chang maintained his composure.

“Of course.” The man raised his brows. “Why feed them if they’re only trying to run away and kill us?” As if promoting his merchandise, the man pointed at each girl, saying. “The girls we kept know their job and are good at it. Hell knows how much time we spent on training them. Some of them are sisters, so as soon as we controlled one of them, the other would become as docile as a puppy...”

“Sounds fun...” Chang covered his disgust with a smile.

“It was...” The man didn’t finish his words, his voice choked.

“Although it sounds fun...” Strangling the man’s neck, Chang’s fingers tightened. The man’s neck bone broke into two. “This is challenging my bottom line.”

The man’s eyes popped out as a result of being choked to death.

Chang threw away the incapacitated body. He took the worm box from the ground, his hand waved, gesturing for Zhizhi to walk out with him.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Chang killed two men with two headshots. The last bullet hit the EM's forehead but apparently the power of the gun was too weak – the bullet got stuck at the frontal bone. The EM had evolved not only his muscles, but also the density of his bones. In other words, the degree of bone hardening made his bones firmer than steel.

Chang's index finger was ready to pull the trigger again, but Zhizhi stepped up and stopped him.

“We came here for the worms, why are you killing them? Even though they did something bad, they don't deserve this, it's their choice,” Zhizhi almost screamed.

“It isn't just something bad. Go ahead and ask the girls.” Chang put away his pistol and stopped talking.

To confirm his answer, Zhizhi squatted down to ask one of the girls in front of her. Later, what the girl told her, made her expression gloomy.

Not only had the men molested and raped these girls, they had also threatened and forced them to search for food. To ensure the

girls would do so, most of their sisters were put under house arrest.

When they were short on food, they even cannibalized the girls.

“Bastards!” Upon hearing the girl weep out her grief, Zhizhi turned furious. She then pulled out a dagger from her belt and hunkered down, stabbing the dagger into the dying man’s anus.

“F*ck you! Son of b*tch!” Zhizhi’s face was contorted. Her anger pushed her action further, she started moving about the blade that was buried in the man. “Does it feel good, huh?”

“Ah!” the dying man emitted a squeal of pain.

“Just kill him! What are you doing?” Chang asked, standing behind her.

“Killing him won’t relieve my fury, I can’t believe cannibalism exists.” As Zhizhi was speaking, she pulled out the dagger and sliced at the man’s ankle and wrist so that his tendons were cut off. She then dragged the man to the door of the classroom by his collar, shouting to the girls, “Someone tell me, where is the closest washroom?”

“Just turn left in the corridor, you’ll see it...” a girl answered in a shaky voice.

Zhizhi smirked to show her appreciation, then left to the

corridor. Seeing this, Chang went behind her hurriedly.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing that you need to worry about, I’m just having a bad day, and I need to alleviate my frustration.” Zhizhi didn’t slow down but sped up. The man groaned in a deep voice but that didn’t make Zhizhi feel any sympathy toward him.

Almost all the citizens knew about the tentacle monsters that evolved and lived in the sewage, and thus, no one used flush toilets nowadays. Thousands of attacks had made humans fear the bloodthirsty tentacles under the toilets, so they became the least safe place to go to. Therefore, most of the washrooms were sealed off—the one in this kindergarten was no exception.

The sealing tape was ripped off in a rough way, and Zhizhi opened the toilet cover, throwing the man onto a seat. She then tied up this EM so that he couldn’t move away, just sit on it.

“May you die in the greatest fear.” Zhizhi even secured the man by having ropes wrapped around his thighs and the toilet. This way, the EM wouldn’t be able to stand up. She laughed. “I’m sorry for stabbing your anus, but you’re dripping blood into the toilet... Let me guess, how soon they will come to you with this flavorful smell of blood?”

“Please...” Her words struck fear into the man. The EM hadn’t even displayed dread in front of a pistol, but this time he begged. “Please let me go, please! I can work for you! You see, I’m very

strong and that makes me capable of tons of things. If you do me a favor today, I'll be loyal to you forever, I promise!"

A series of melodious chuckles came from Zhizhi's thin lips. She nodded, and her heart was filled with satisfaction. "Sounds pretty nice... but sweetheart, I don't need anything but for you to go to hell."

To stop the man from pleading, Zhizhi grabbed a mop from beside the door and shoved its head into the man's mouth.

The washroom was left with the man alone inside; the air was frozen since Zhizhi had walked out the door. The man's desperation leaked from his wide open eyes, accompanied by blood drippling down from his anus. The drops were the tick tocks of a timed bomb. Every second passed slowly breaking down his nerve.

Even though Zhizhi had done something cruel to the EM, her expression wasn't nervous at all, instead, she kept smiling silently and waved to Chang, who awaited her outside the washroom.

"Zhizhi, I didn't know you were so cold-blooded..." Chang, too, turned around, walking away with Zhizhi and leaving the hopeless EM alone in the washroom that was suffused with torments of remorse.

The duo returned to the classroom, seeing the girls having found their clothing. They sat on the ground with shirts or dresses loosely covering their young bodies. Their eyes were still innocent as those of puppies. Instead of being filled with fear, they gazed at

Chang and Zhizhi, who were now in charge of their lives.

“You can live your own lives now, just go somewhere you want to.” Chang waved his hand. “I know some of the communities are still accepting new members, but I just can’t guarantee your safety there... Your youth is wanted so badly by the gangsters, I can’t say for sure that you won’t be traded again.”

Thinking of their miserable fate, Chang didn’t continue speaking since he knew these teen girls were the most vulnerable in the apocalypse, even if they lived in a relatively safe community. If they were lucky enough, they might become farmers. But most likely, they would be treated as bargaining chips.

Chang looked up at the ceiling, heaving a long sigh. “Just go.” He waved his hand again.

As Chang urged them again, the girls reluctantly left the classroom one after another. All except for that one girl who had met Chang before.

“Can I go with you, please?” she asked.

“No, you cannot.” Chang shook his head.

The girl nodded at his answer and didn’t ask again, but neither did she leave.

“She is smart” Zhizhi commented as a spectator of this

conversation. She then threw herself to the bed, falling on her back. “The apocalypse made the bad worse, and the good ones suffer.”

Zhizhi teased Chang, “Hey, didn’t you think of something else when you saw those naked girls?”

Chang walked backward and slowly laid himself on the bed as well. “Even if I wanted to, I know the consequences would make me sad...”

Zhizhi gazed at the ceiling, murmuring. “You are a good guy.”

Keeping his eyes closed, Chang said, “Why do you say that?”

“You have a good nature, kind and caring,” Zhizhi spoke softly. “I’m glad that Zhuo’s special force didn’t kill you.”

“I’m the opposite of good.” Hearing her compliment, Chang wasn’t delighted at all. “I’m just disinclined to take responsibility. I always have the feeling that If I do something good, responsibility comes with it. And I can’t even take care of myself now...”

“If I ever am capable, I wish I could grant them safety...”

...

Chang and Zhizhi had a long conversation that day. Jing joined

later, and they ventured to some strange topics. They left the classroom after two hours. Before they went, they checked-up on the EM that was tied to the toilet—he was dead.

The tentacle monster hadn't killed him. He had died of fright.

The teen girl followed them when they left the kindergarten, but the trio quickened their pace. Soon, she lost sight of them.

Chapter 102: A Storm Is Coming

For almost a month, Zhizhi, Jing, and Chang spent their days in peace.

There was a troop of soldiers chasing them, but Chang and Zhizhi were able to backtrack the pursuers before they got close. Countless times, the troop hunted for nothing. In the end, they would disappear from Zhizhi's olfactive perception range, probably just returning to the military as they aborted the impossible mission.

In the city of Zhengzhou, quite a few explosive news spread.

The first news was that a month ago, which was five days after Chang retrieved their worm box, The Agent Orange plan was well-implemented and completed in time. Most of the non-cultivation fields were sprayed with the chemical. And as Zhuo had anticipated, these affected areas became barren. The devastated plants lost their color, and their feeble stems lay flat on the ground.

Once Zhuo's goal was achieved, the government and the military tasted the sweetness of convenience. They also began clamoring to clear the highways that connected the cities using Agent Orange.

However, the clamor only lasted for a few days. The decision was stalled for a long time, and in the end, still not made. No one knew whether it was because the regional political struggle made the authorities yearn for more power and hence they didn't want to

connect with the central government that would take away their freedom to do as they wished, or it was because the research institute ran out of Agent Orange, which resulted in the mission having to be aborted since the amount of the chemical was insufficient to implement the plan. Either way, the clamor was settled down.

Civilization restored itself once the plants, which were shelters for predators, withered. The animals were either killed off by the army or fled to the jungle as Zhuo had expected.

Once the citizens were granted safety, it meant that the old industrial activities could be resumed, and the people were assigned to different infrastructure projects. Their wages were the seeds of the Crystal Pea—the more they worked, the more they would be awarded; and if they chose not to work, they wouldn't get any seeds since the distribution stations were going to be cancelled soon. It was a simple solution, and Zhuo's ruled civilization continued to flourish.

And that was the first news.

The second was a political storm.

During the prolonged political struggle in Zhengzhou, the military, which owned all the armies in Zhengzhou, took over the control of the city. It also disintegrated the government, completely transforming the city into a city-state with political and military power fused together. During the revolution, Zhuo was again pushed to the center of the storm, becoming one of the most influential and powerful men in the newly born system.

Zhuo was like the sun shining high in the sky.

But while he was desired by both the system and the people, the food preservation method based on irradiation that he had endorsed caused unexpected mutations. Almost all the higher-ups in Zhengzhou were affected.

A hypermutable bacteria that was born during the irradiation process ravaged the military government, causing more than half of the high officials to die from infections. The bacteria had strong multidrug resistance, and the current antibiotic treatments failed to suppress its replication. Those who were infected were isolated, and had to wait for death to bring them away from their torment.

The hierarchy of the ruling system became fragile again...

In the research institute.

In Group Alpha.

“Qing Shui, what is all that mess?” Zhuo stood beside Qing Shui, his brows tied. “The preservation method I used should be perfect, that hypermutable bacteria simply shouldn’t exist.”

“The irradiation method was absolutely safe to preserve food if you used it before this apocalypse,” Qing Shui answered in calm voice, gently shaking the testing tube in his hand. “But irradiation has become unstable now that it became extremely easy for the

bacterias and viruses to mutate and evolve. Not to mention the effect of the surroundings, the red fog. I told you not to use this method before, but you were too rash in making that decision.”

“I do admit it’s all my fault. But I still think this hypermutable bacteria wasn’t a usual occurrence.” Zhuo glanced on Qing Shui’s expressionless face, then continued, “It wasn’t a bad thing either. The infection wiped out quite the amount of higher ups, so we’ll have less opposition from now on.”

“True, most of the higher ups were too weak to resist the infection themselves. They all passed away on the first night of the bacteria’s leakage.” Qing Shui smirked imperceptibly to himself, . “No one will dare to stand against us. But I think you need to be more cautious, since the power system is reconciling.”

“Why should I be?” Zhuo laughed wildly as he heard Qing Shui’s advice. “Who doesn’t know my special force in Zhengzhou? I have more than a hundred gene-altered soldiers. Even if they might not be as useful as a normal regiment, they are still more than capable in a raid. No one can stop them, no one!

“Whoever voices out to be against my plan, I’ll make them silent. There shouldn’t be any other people making the decisions except me, and all I need are people who implement my plans...”

“Sure.” Qing Shui nodded.

“By the way,” Zhuo said suddenly. “Even if I’ve said something arrogant, I want you to speed up the development of the antibiotic.

We can't afford to have the bacteria reach normal citizens. In the worst case scenario, the whole city might go extinct."

"I got it." Qing Shui brought two testing tubes in front of his eyes, observing the chemical reaction. "The preparations are done. Although it can't cure the infection with one shot, it'll suppress the bacterial cell division."

Qing Shui's eyes twinkled with confidence, affirming Zhuo's concern.

"Good to hear that." Zhuo's eyes squinted as he smiled.

"One more thing," Qing Shui added in a casual tone. "I heard that the water plant was clogged by something unknown. Initially I thought it was some sort of mutated algae occupying it, but the troop I sent a few days ago didn't return to report. And the other troops I sent later didn't return, either. The last time, I dispatched a company of soldiers. They suffered heavy casualties, but two returned with news."

"What news?" Zhuo was intrigued.

"A monster in the Yellow River, they called it Yessie." Even though Qing Shui was speaking about something horrifying that had taken more than a hundred lives, his emotions didn't change a bit. "But I don't think it's a monster."

"What do you mean?"

“It’s simply a super life.”

“A super life?” Zhuo supported his chin, leaning on the table. “Does it mean it’s a highly mutated life? It killed off its competitors and happened to become the most aggressive in the Yellow River?”

“Exactly, It’s extremely powerful. I was fortunate enough to meet one before.”

“How powerful is it?” Zhuo was filled with excitement.

“I don’t know about it in detail, we only met once. I didn’t even see its full body.” Qing Shui placed the tube back onto the rack. “If it grew in accordance to my calculations, the super life I met is five thousand times stronger than an average human.”

“The base number you used is an average human...” Zhuo’s face was distorted with terror, but his expression made it seem like he had acted this way intentionally. “This is impossible! If it’s as powerful as you tell me, I doubt it can be destroyed even with nuclear weapons!”

Chapter 103: Rebellion

“It isn’t impossible that a super life might have absorbed nutrients from the underground of the whole Kaifeng. It’s intelligent and capable enough to even plunder human brains as its source of growing intelligence. Its strength exceeded 5000 if I were to convert it into a number. And that is merely my conservative estimation.” Qing Shui’s expression changed when he talked about the first time he had met Willow. “The correct estimation should be about 6000, and it’s still growing.”

“Then what about Yessie?” Zhuo was affected by Qing Shui, his courageous spirit was chilled by his words.

“We shouldn’t be worrying about Yessie. Because there were soldiers who returned to report, it means that this super life isn’t as strong as it was described.” Qing Shui beamed. “There are differences between super lives. They are like humans, some of them are just more competent than the others.”

“Then what is its number if you were to quantify Yessie’s lethality?”

“It won’t exceed five hundred. Let me tell you how this works, for every digit an organism climbs up, the power grows exponentially. For example, although each of your special force’s soldiers is about thirty, it can effortlessly kill three hundred humans. Therefore, Yessie isn’t comparable to the Willow I met,” Qing Shui explained. “Yessie isn’t intelligent, and it’s bulky. I suspect that it isn’t too muscular but flabby. Its skin won’t be too enhanced. I’d be surprised if its skin is stronger than your gene-

altered soldiers' scales. It's beatable with mortars and artilleries."

"Then, I will collect information about Yessie." Zhuo's eyes were sparkling with insanity. "Qing Shui, what do you think my soldiers will become when I transfer Yessie's gene in them?"

"They will be invincible," Qing Shui said with the corners of his mouth sliding upwards.

"I thought so as well." Zhuo shed his mania as he walked out of the lab. "I'll gather my team, and you get the antibiotic ready."

"I got it." Qing Shui's still tone squeezed through the closing gap of the door.

Zhuo was always a man of action, and he didn't tolerate any sloppiness.

In the same afternoon that Zhuo had made up his mind to slaughter the Yessie, three companies of soldiers were gathered and then dispatched with a considerable amount of mortars and artilleries, as well as additional one hundred gene-altered soldiers. The army advanced toward the Yellow River to confront Yessie.

On the same day, there was a series of homicides occurring at midnight. The remaining higher ups were either assassinated, poisoned with neurotoxin, or ended up as lab rats for the hypermutable bacteria.

The storm was brief. It all happened in a blink of an eye, and no riot was caused.

On the second day at noon, a cohort of soldiers besieged Chang's safe house.

The siege was rather peculiar, as if those who encircled them already knew their abilities. The company formed a circle from far away, and the size of the circle rapidly reduced, leaving Chang and Zhizhi no time to react. They were like turtles in a jar when faced with such a strategy.

Surrendering himself in the courtyard, Chang raised his hands as he was faced with more than fifty automatic machine guns.

"I didn't know that I was worth that much to you, Zhuo. You have us now," Chang shouted out.

"It wasn't Zhuo, it's me."

A shade of white surfaced from the camouflage uniforms. It caught Chang's eyes immediately.

"Mr. Li?" The white lab coat raised Chang's mood from hell to heaven. "Why are you here?"

"I have a plan, and now I need your vision, Jing's perception, and this lady's..." Qing Shui tilted his head so that he could stare into Zhizhi's eyes. "And I need this lady's olfactory ability."

“And the reason behind all these arrangements?” Chang’s heart started thumping.

“It’s time. It’s time to settle what is between me and Zhuo.” Qing Shui raised his head, looking at the sky. “I’ve been waiting for so long. I just finished reconstructing the power center of Zhengzhou and managed to take control of the situation with my alliance. The last thing that we need to be worried about is Zhuo himself.

“He led a few companies to the Yellow River. As long as we make sure he won’t return to Zhengzhou, the city will never be his.” As Qing Shui spoke, he gestured with two fingers to ask a man with delicate and pale skin to step away from the soldiers. “Let me introduce you, he is the expert in deductive reasoning from Group Beta, and he specializes in weapon manufacturing. It was all his work that we were able to find you today.”

“Nice to meet you.” The fine man was attentive to Qing Shui and Chang’s conversation. He was courteous and friendly, extending his hand to Chang.

“Pleasure to meet you as well.” Chang held his warm hand but his heart palpitated. If this man had helped Zhuo instead of Qing Shui, they would have been captured long time ago.

“Zhuo was dictatorial in the research institute for quite a long time already. He took possession of our funding and resources to support his own group, leaving less than one fifth of the allowance for the other four groups. I was irritated by the way he did things

since day one. It was my pleasure to be able to help Qing Shui,” explained the fine man who seemed to read Chang’s fear. He eased the situation by stepping back. “I’m merely a pathfinder, don’t worry about me. Qing Shui has waited long to reunite with you.”

The fine man stood behind Qing Shui, keeping his head low to show his humbleness.

“Well then, we don’t have time to catch up with your adventures for now. Let’s talk about them afterward. I’ve gathered a rapid deployment force to locate where Zhuo is now,” Qing Shui said softly, explaining the situation to Chang. “Zhuo left to the Yellow River for the Yessie, which I told him that it was a super life in the river that evolved. The Yessie in the Yellow River isn’t as weak as I told him and should be able to slaughter half of his special forces. But the companies would be unaffected as they use ranged weapons.

“I have plans on dealing with those soldiers, but what we need to be more careful of are the one hundred gene-altered soldiers.”

“One hundred?”

The number gave Chang headache.

He had paid his price for fighting with the gene-altered soldiers.

Now weaponless, he couldn’t beat even one. And among those one hundred gene-altered soldiers, there would certainly appear

one that would manage, under the disguise of the red fog, to break through the ranks and behead their commander. The chances of killing all of them before that could happen were zero.

“I know what you’re thinking about, but I have my own little tricks.” The companies of soldiers separated, opening a pathway, and then rejoined again after sending out a troop armed with altered weapons. “They were trained to fight against Zhuo’s special force, and thanks to Group Beta, the newly manufactured weapons have improved accuracy and precision, thus able to hit high speed targets.”

“It’s impossible! Impossible even if you enhanced all aspect of their weapons!” Chang scanned the young faces in the troop. “What are their numbers?”

“In average, they are eights.” Pointing at the gigantic weapon in their hands, Qing Shui said, “A repeater with a large caliber, it can tear steel like a piece of cloth.”

“I trust your weapons, but they are just too fast to catch up with. I only had a brief battle with the gene-altered soldiers, but their speed was formidable. Now you’re telling me, you’ll attempt to eliminate the gene-altered soldiers with this troop. Qing Shui, I don’t understand what you’re thinking, they aren’t even as fast as me! And their poor vision...” Chang spoke in manner that the words were like bullets shooting from his mouth in quick succession. “What about missiles or nuclear weapons? With them we could make sure they won’t come back.”

“It isn’t as simple as what you’re talking.” Qing Shui heaved a

sigh. “How many people do you think that have the power of launching a nuclear weapon? And do you think we have a nuclear weapon in Zhengzhou?”

“Without proper radar system, missiles aren’t that effective since they’ll miss the targets. I do have automatic machine guns and quite a large amount of mortars and artilleries brought, but with these conventional firearms, we can’t pin down their companies. The reality is cruel.” Qing Shui paused, then continued speaking, “The possibility of causing death to him is zero when he is with his special force.

“My goal today is to exterminate his presence, and to assure that, I’ll be witness to his death.” Qing Shui squinted his eyes as words slipped from his lips. “Zhengzhou will never be peaceful while he’s still alive. Holding the gene-altered soldiers as his trump card, Zhuo would hang my head over the billboard at the entrance of Zhengzhou if I was ever caught betraying him.

“Therefore, I myself will be the bait in this battle. I know him well enough that I’m hundred percent sure that he’ll be raging to get my head after finding out I’ve turned my back on him.”

“Then, what did you prepare for this battle?” Chang asked one last question.

“The bacteria bomb.” The calmness in Qing Shui’s eyes was tinted with a touch of madness. “It was made from my secret ingredient - the hypermutable bacteria. Once it detonates over that area, the infection will kill off all the human soldiers.

“The gene-altered soldiers may resist the infection but their physical strength will be dwarfed. When the time arrives, my elite troop will come in handy.”

“Bacteria bomb?” Chang was startled, his pupils dilated. “That is a weapon of mass destruction that uses biochemicals!”

“I don’t care about what I use today. This is the one time that I would ever throw bacteria bombs. Zhuo will become more rabid and greedy if I don’t take him out for the fellow scientists.” Qing Shui grabbed Chang’s shoulder. “Offer me your help, please! If I have your vision and Jing’s perception, Zhuo won’t be able to kill me!”

“I...” Chang’s fingers clutched the gripping hand, locking his eyes on the familiar yet strange face. He was dulled by Qing Shui’s zeal, able only to nod. “I’ll try.”

“Thank you, Chang. Really.” Qing Shui’s smile was full of pure happiness. He turned around and pinched Jing’s cheek, then left to lead the companies without speaking another word.

The impression of ocean was what Chang had of Qing Shui in his mind, a torrential flow disguised by a pure, unblemished surface.

“Jing, you’re right.” As that shade of white disappeared in the red fog, Chang lifted up Jing in his arms, following after the soldiers. “Mr. Li has changed.”

“What changed?” Zhizhi gazed in the direction that Qing Shui had left in. She asked, “What was he like before?”

“Whatever, I have a feeling that this person is much more terrifying than Zhuo,” Zhizhi voiced her thoughts aloud, cold sweat forming on her forehead. It was as if Qing Shui’s presence alone put a tremendous pressure on her mind.

Chapter 104: All In All

“Perhaps, perhaps he is indeed more intimidating than Zhuo.” Chang lightly pushed Zhizhi’s back to get her moving, hinting for her to catch up with the proceeding soldiers. “Even if that is true, I’m still willing to help him.

“Because I believe in him.

“I believe that he is more human-like than Zhuo.”

Chang was reminded of when he, Qing Shui, and Jing had fled from the jungle, and Qing Shui had decided to return to the abyss to rescue Pangzi. That fist bump they did in front of the welcome billboard would never disappear from his mind.

Chang felt a surge of tears welling up in his eyes when he thought of that day, but he blinked a few times to hold them back, then sped up so that his group wouldn’t be left behind.

...

In two hours, the three thousand soldiers Qing Shui had brought with aligned into columns. He hadn’t brought as many as Zhuo had, but the number of soldiers wasn’t the key to triumph. The composition of their enemies was quite special. Once the bacteria bomb massacred most of the normal human soldiers, and it was time to defend against Zhuo’s special force, more soldiers meant more sacrifices.

The regiment marched from Zhengzhou to irrigation gate of the Yellow River, traveling along the national highway 107 toward the north. They would also have pass through a small segment of the jungle's edge in twenty kilometers.

The regiment was of an average size, the number of the soldiers even less than the population of an ordinary college. If someone was to take a look from the sky, the regiment wouldn't be noticeable at all. They were soon inundated by the gloom of the thick jungle.

Qing Shui, the fine man, and Chang were the lead of the whole regiment, while Zhizhi and Jing acted as a radar during the march. They walked right beside front.

Chang was in charge of planning out the route on the winding trail while Zhizhi chose the general direction. The fine man, who specialised in deductive reasoning, mapped out Zhuo's formation in accordance to the footsteps and traces, simultaneously briefing in Qing Shui.

The path they took was absolutely safe since Zhuo's formation had already marched through this same route. The special force must have expelled the majority of the predators from this area, clearing out even their hideouts, and thus, Qing Shui's regiment could only focus their energy on marching on the flat road.

The journey was full of peace and tranquility, the regiment almost reaching their destination in three hours.

“Stop,” Qing Shui ordered as he strode to the peak of a slope. “We’re less than ten kilometers from Zhuo’s formation, so there’s a chance we might expose ourselves to them early if we get too close.”

“You’re right, although we are protected by the red fog, we don’t know if he secretly stationed some other EMs that we haven’t met in the surroundings. The distance is relatively safe here,” the fine man agreed, nodding at Qing Shui.

“Thanks. Wang, can you roughly estimate their location and how they’re deployed for me?”

Gesturing for the regiment to move up the slope, Qing Shui handed a small sketch book to the fine man. He then ordered the soldiers who toted the mortar and artillery components to assemble the weapons on the spot.

Most of the soldiers busied themselves with the assembling. Because transportation tools were mostly limited by the energy supply and the difficulties of operating with limited vision, they could only transport things by manual labour.

Tens of soldiers would carry all the components for a single artillery, and there were more than 15 of them brought. First, the soldiers who had the parts of the same artillery gathered together and took off their backpacks holding the parts. Then, five of the soldiers from each group would dominate the assembling process as they were trained in the craft.

While the soldiers were busy, Qing Shui joined the crowd and arranged some positionings. He and some other officers then distributed the special respirators to every soldier on the field.

The assembling process was long and complicated. It took almost two hours for the artilleries and mortars to be assembled even with the effort of a thousand soldiers.

At the same time, Qing Shui walked to the center of the regiment, waving his hand to a squad that bore boxes of custom bombs.

Qing Shui scanned the surroundings and made sure the preparations were done. He then rejoined Chang and the others, looking at Zhizhi.

“They’re still there, aren’t they?”

“They are. I can smell the odour of humans and the scent of the blood from over there.” Zhizhi raised her head, eyes closed. Her nose wings twitched as she said, “But all I can be sure about is that they haven’t left yet. The scents are mixing altogether, I can’t distinguish individuals until we get closer.”

“No worries.” Qing Shui gave her a knowing look that affirmed her output. Then he asked Chang, “What do you think? Can you go over there to check out what is happened there for me? Your vision and Jing’s perception make for the best combination, and we need to know more about where Zhuo is at this moment.”

“Sure.” Chang stood up from the ground, dusting off the mud from his pants.

“Be safe, I only want to know how far they are from us and their general location. It doesn’t need to be a detailed report of what they are doing exactly.” Seeing Chang obediently submitting to his request, Qing Shui hesitated. He reached to his pocket and took out a syringe with some kind of liquid inside, then said, “Take this. Inject it when you can no longer escape from danger.”

“What is this?” Chang held up the syringe, but he still couldn’t see what exactly was inside.

“This is the product of my recent research project. It’ll empower you.” Qing Shui’s expression changed. He seemed to be pained mentally. “But it hasn’t passed the human subject test yet. Even I don’t know what side effects it might have. Don’t use it until the very last minute. I’m afraid of the consequences, that you might become one of those soldiers who were injected with the red fog concentrate, gaining enhanced strength for a few days before death arrived.”

“Got it.” Chang placed the syringe into his shirt’s pocket and patted it twice. He then lifted Jing up into his arms and ran down the slope. “I will keep myself away from them!”

Chang bolted down before his voice dropped. The wind brushed his hair as he ran toward the direction Zhizhi had pointed to.

It was only less than 10 kilometers, which wasn't far to Chang at all. In fact, he could sprint over one kilometer in ninety seconds in the jungle. Thus, when Jing sensed the presence of Zhuo's army, he had been traveling for only ten minutes.

His arms tightened to ensure Jing wouldn't fall off from his arms. He didn't go any closer but patrolled around the vague shadows of Zhuo's regiments. He veered back to Qing Shui after he confirmed their locations.

The whole information collection was smooth.

He noticed that Zhuo's soldiers were celebrating—their thirteen-hour long battle with the Yessie had just ended, and it happened to match with Qing Shui's arrival. The coincidence made Chang suspect that Qing Shui might have arranged this.

This was the time when their enemies had suffered heavy casualties, and those still alive lied back and relaxed. It was the perfect timing to have the greatest impact on Zhuo's force.

However, Chang knew he'll never find out how Qing Shui had calculated the length of the battle, nor how he could estimate Yessie's endurance even without having seen it before.

Not that any of these puzzles were his business

Another ten minutes passed and Chang returned with the locations. He pinpointed them on Wang's map, and that was the

start of the first wave of Qing Shui's long-awaited attack.

“Calibrate to the direction of 11 o'clock! Load the bacteria bomb!”

Chapter 105: Humans And Power

“Fire!”

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Fifteen streams of lights sprang high up into the sky under Qing Shui’s command. Along with the deafening thuds, the bombs began to descend at the area that Chang had pinpointed on the map.

The bombs accelerated and descended one by one, their fire tails illuminating the fog before drowning in the horizon. Chang absently stared at the vanishing fire tails from behind the special respirator that covered his face—they called it an anti-bacteria respirator now. He hunkered down, Jing wrapped in his arms.

The red fog disguised what was was happening that far away, so he could only imagine the aftermath on the banks of the Yellow River.

Without a doubt, the human soldiers would die in pain one by one. No one could stand against the hypermutable bacteria that was made under Qing Shui’s hands. He only wondered what was the last thing they would think of during their last breath.

Would they be overwhelmed with the fear of death? Would they miss their mothers? Or would they die in peace because they were finally free from the war against the nature?

Chang relaxed his sore legs, sitting down on the hill. At this moment, there was nothing left for him to do. He rested his head on his arm, but his eyes were locked on the figure that was directing the artillery. The bacteria bomb would cause over ten thousands deaths, yet Qing Shui retained a serene aura around him.

The apocalypse and evolution propelled the transformation of minds.

Before the apocalypse, that person who now stood at the peak, was merely a high school biology teacher. He might have been talented, but his occupation was limited to the field of education while surviving in the highly competitive society.

Now, Qing Shui as an EM, standing at the top of the social pyramid, had become an important personage that held the world in his hands.

In peacetime, power could rot pure minds. But Chang didn't know about the days in the apocalypse, what kind of changes to a person's spirit would absolute power and intelligence bring in a time like this. Nor did he know whether Qing Shui could control his growing desire for power with his great intelligence.

Perhaps one day, Jing, who he had been protecting and taking care of, would be taken away. Perhaps he would be living a precarious existence. Perhaps he would give up his moral principles because of fear and death threats to become the kind of

person that he used to hate, behaving in a way that he used to be disgusted by.

“Humans sometimes have no choices but are compelled.”

It might sound less accurate in peacetime, but in the ears of humans who lived in the apocalypse, the sentence rang with cruel truthfulness to it...

The endless shellfire was being shot right in front of Chang's eyes. The war zone experience affected him so profoundly that he had a feeling that he was brought to the center of the storm while watching sparks drifting and falling from the sky. Although it was only the first battle, the world was no longer recognisable.

The shellfire continued.

The roar of artillery gradually subsided as their bacteria bombs ran out.

When the thundering sound came to an end, Chang stood up from the ground—the first chapter was finished. It was time for him to face tribulation.

“Jing, let me know when there are moving objects in your perception,” Chang bade Jing again and put away his thoughts.

He moved to the elite squad. Receiving an altered machine gun from a squad member, he squinted his eyes as he relied more on his

vision to seek out their targets.

“Close ranks, march!” Qing Shui ordered from hill’s peak. He was directing soldiers, but he also seemed to be attracting something.

The moment Qing Shui’s command was delivered, there was an intranquil sound which consisted of screaming and firing sent back from the vanguard legion. Jing immediately pointed her finger to the source. “Over there, about a hundred meters.”

“Mortars! Fire!” Qing Shui paid close attention to Jing’s guidance. His arm straightened, waving down to command those pre-arranged soldiers to initiate their attack.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Fire-tailed shells rivaled each other in the air, all bombarding to the same spot. It resulted in a continuous din, and fire blooming on the land.

The first wave of attacks from the gene-altered soldiers commenced where Chang couldn’t see.

However, Qing Shui’s attack soon diminished as the fire didn’t catch a lot of flammable material. When the fire ceased, Chang didn’t see any of those fearless figures bolting toward Qing Shui’s fort—it was as peaceful as if nothing had happened.

“Jing, are those gene-altered soldiers dead?” Chang was agonized

by this unusual situation.

“Nope, I can only sense a few that were injured. Most of them remained unhurt, but they disappeared from my perception range,” Jing said in a light voice.

“How many are coming toward us?” Qing Shui inquired.

“From what I can sense, there are about twenty to thirty. Their index is below 21, so I suspect that they are all infected,” Jing answered. “But I noticed that a few out of their indexes are fluctuating tremendously, and they are all above 45 now, meaning that they grew much stronger than before.”

Qing Shui wasn't surprised at all. He simply nodded.”Before Zhuo departed, he brought seven red fog concentrate syringes for his special force. He planned to use them against the Yessie, but it seems like he didn't use them all.”

“The red fog concentrate?” Chang asked. “Didn't it have a severe side-effect that caused sudden death?”

“Indeed it'll cause sudden death, but it can briefly boost the somatic functions.” Qing Shui had his brows tied. “He doesn't care about his special force that much anyways.”

While Qing Shui was still talking, Jing hurriedly shouted out, “They're coming again! From all directions. They scattered!”

“I see.” Qing Shui’s elite squad held up their guns in unison with his gesture. “You’ll shoot as well.”

Chang nodded. He picked up that large caliber repeater and looked into the flowing red fog.

At the same time, a wave of bombardment tore through the air.

“Those were the mines that my company laid before. But they weren’t designed to kill anyone. Now, everyone, ready!”

Accompanied by the deafening explosions and Qing Shui’s loud orders, the gene-altered soldiers entered Chang’s vision one by one.

These gene-altered soldiers were slow compared to the ones he had dealt with before. They all looked unwell since the bacteria had infected their muscles and nerves. Some of them were even injured with shrapnel lodged in their muscles. Others had lost some of their scales, exposing their tight and pale muscles.

Seeing these remnants, Chang pulled the trigger without hesitation.

A rattle of gunfire tore apart the previously motionless atmosphere.

Chang’s vision was the best of them all, hence he was the first one to fire. Those injured and weakened gene-altered soldiers were

slower than Chang moving his gun. Aided with his fine calculation ability, the first bullet array caused an explosion on the gene-altered soldier that he saw first. The highly explosive bullet almost broke the gene-altered soldier into two pieces, and the creature was thrown away by the momentum.

Upon his success in exterminating the first gene-altered soldier, he turned his body to locate his next target. For every gene-altered soldier he saw coming, he fired his repeater without any hesitation.

Soon, he killed off three gene-altered soldiers. Meanwhile, the remaining gene-altered soldiers kept climbing up to the slope while facing an unceasing explosive bullets.

Qing Shui's elite squad responded quickly to the creatures that appeared from the red fog, and they were also equipped with bizarre looking goggles. According to Qing Shui, they were made out of a frequency-separating lens.

After a special treatment, the goggles allowed their wearers to see additional two meters. However, the compromisation of the improvement was that it dimmed the overall vision.

That was to say, the goggles weren't helpful to Chang but it did a lot to human soldiers—after all, being able see two meters farther meant that they had almost doubled their current vision.

Therefore, given the fact that the elite squad had undergone special training and was equipped with the goggles, it was just as

functional as Chang.

For a while, the gene-altered soldiers struggled to break through under the suppressive fire. It was so until Chang noticed that a few of them had plastic explosives secured to their backs, and the absolute balance was broken.

“Stop firing! They’re bringing explosives!”

A gene-altered was shot while struggling to dodge the bullets, and the plastic explosive detonated before Chang had even finished giving his warning to the squad. The creature shattered, his limbs blown away into pieces which then rained in front of the squad.

Boom!

A heated blast caused by the explosion swept across the field. Chang’s pupils contracted as he saw clouds of dust soaring skyward, then flooding toward them.

It all happened in a flash, so Chang was just able to cover Jing with his body. The heated wave gusted over his back, the sand borne by the wave scraping his skin. Uncontrollably, Chang and Jing were swept away for over two meters by the currents that blew them off the slope.

“What the hell! Was it C4?”

Chang plunged to the ground, back first. He picked himself up,

then spat out the mud and sand that choked him. His whole back was taken hostage by a burning pain which spread to the back of his head.

“Ah!”

Although Jing landed less harshly in Chang’s arms, the shock caused blood to spurt out from her nose and mouth.

Chang didn’t have time to check his own condition, nor Jing’s. He immediately climbed up from the ground and placed Jing behind a tree that was just blown down by the blast. Then he ran off to pick up the repeater that he had dropped and went back to the position where he was designated to fight back from.

Zhuo must have used those C4 to fight against the Yessie, and then, distributed the remaining ones to the gene-altered soldiers to take vengeance on Qing Shui for his betrayal.

Chang could never think as fast as Zhuo under this chaos. Considering the suppressive fire that Zhuo was resisting, Chang had to admit that he was one of the most intrepid people that he’d seen his life, since he was able to act so swiftly against an unfavorable situation.

Chapter 106: Qing Shui And Zhuo

“Correct! I don’t see a reason why I shouldn’t think of myself as the God of this world!” Zhuo burst into wild laughter. “You are too timid, do you understand? With all that respect and awe for nature, you can’t make great success in research!”

“Humans are supposed to respect to nature, the road to evolution isn’t glory but a one way trip with trepidation.”

“Don’t speak to me of your coward theories. I only believe in myself. And the one who is standing here is me, I’m the person who chooses whether you live or die. This is the difference between a coward and a God.”

“Well,”—Qing Shui was undisturbed—“what makes you think that you have control over the whole situation?”

“Interesting, you’re telling me that you have a plan B or something?” Zhuo asked, discarding Qing Shui’s threat. “Just give up, I know you better than anyone since day one. Your degree of mutation is lower than mine and so is the amount of connections and opportunities in the institute. You’re just simply less than me, there isn’t even a slightest hope for you.”

“I know. I’m always less than you, and that’s why I always pay more attention to you,” Qing Shui said, raising his right arm while speaking.

His movement was clearly seen by Chang, who had been paying

close attention to Zhuo. From the disorderly gaps between bushes, Chang faintly saw a familiar scar on Qing Shui's forearm. It was the product of Qing Shui's gene-alteration experiment, and Chang had one as well.

The hidden representation of the scar would be palpitating.

"What is this?" Zhuo demanded, noticing the scar, too. His tone rose with confusion.

"I have done what you've been thinking, the gene-altering experiment. You're the most intelligent person I've ever known, guess whose gene I mixed with mine?"

"Gene..." Zhuo gazed at the scar. A moment later, his expression changed, the reality hitting him hard, and he finally tasted fear. "Mine...You mixed mine with yours?"

"Bingo! I extracted your DNA from the hair that you left in my lab. How ironic! You should have been the person to complete this experiment, but you think of yourself as a God, and because of that, you just won't allow yourself to remain trapped in that average body, will you? You have pursue perfection in every way, yet that became your downfall." Qing Shui laughed in a way that he had never done before. His mouth widened, and he smirked at Zhuo "Unlike you, I don't think a human needs to be perfect. Since when you achieve the peak of intelligence among all humans, physical strength is no longer a must-have.

"Therefore, comparing the end result of attaining perfect

combination of strength and intelligence, I prefer advancing my brain.” Qing Shui laughed loudly and wildly. “Fortunately, I succeeded. You would never catch me again, from now on. The incredible secondary Encephalon Mutation has blessed me!

“Even though I’ve attained that quite some time ago, I still put up with your temper and greed. As you said, you have much more resources and connections than me, because you came first.” His guffaw vanished, instead, he gave Zhuo a scornful look. “Did your advantages constrain me? No. The world still belongs to those with brains.

“In fact, to snare you into my game, I’ve set up 17 traps for you. But you were never conscious about them, why?” Qing Shui looked into Zhuo’s pupils, as if his stare could see through the man’s soul. “I was smarter than you already. That is the only truth you need to know. Your poor mind could never realize I began my revenge a long time ago...

“And the last thing... Your special force, you’ve more than a hundred of them, and thanks to them, I forbore my growing desire until now. Zhuo, you’re doomed, you only have three left.”

Qing Shui only tapped lightly on the muscular arms that choked his neck, and that gene-altered soldier, who was boosted by the red fog concentrate, loosened his finger in a daze.

Upon regaining freedom, Qing Shui guffawed again, his face distorted with ecstasy. “Today is your downfall. For all the nights I endeavored in plotting, for all the days I disguised my true self, I shall let you savor the taste of death.

“Zhuo, you’ve nowhere to escape.” Qing Shui’s expression resemble Zhuo’s insanity. “I was never the villain, remember that. I respected you, and that’s why I let you know what you’re dying for.”

The gene-altered soldiers lost their consciousness and collapsed when Qing Shui dropped his last word.

For the first time, fear seized Zhuo. His instincts and quick-witted mind drove him to escape without hesitation.

At the same time Zhuo fled, Chang felt pins and needles over his scalp, stunned by Qing Shui. His heart shuddered, and hair stood on end; an eye twinkled. It was as if an invisible wave blustered over the land, with which his mind drifted away. In that brief moment, his past and future kept flashing in front of his eyes, the scenarios shuffled and replayed, causing Chang to get lost in the hallucination. It was a weird experience, and Chang forgot about his plight and blacked out from the apparition.

Before he had become completely comatose, he heard Qing Shui’s voice in haze.

“You can’t run away even if you’re probably the fastest among us. How could you possibly run away from my mind?”

The inky darkness then corroded Chang’s last bit of consciousness.

As if Chang had a long and steamy dream, he recalled fragments of memories in a trance. For example, that piece of tissue paper that he used to use to tease girls when he was in kindergarten; that nest of caterpillars that he and his playmate discovered underneath a brick of an old house; and that movie he saw a few years ago.

Those events that had been forgotten in his life became star lights that twinkled on the black canvas, shining, spinning, as if they were eager to unfold themselves. They twirled before approaching Chang one by one, and later burned to ashes.

When the canvas lost the last star, Chang regained his consciousness. His face first wrenched with pain, but in the next second, he opened his eyes.

“Ah!”

Besides the red fog, endless green was the first thing he saw. The plants were about seven meters above him. While glancing over them, Chang also sensed the jolting.

“Are you awake?”

A familiar face obstructed the greenery. When the dizziness retreated, Chang realized it was Qing Shui, who had his gentle smile back on his face.

“... Yep!”

The jolting came from the stretcher. Chang supported himself with his elbows to sit up while bearing pains from all over the body. He looked left and right at the soldiers who bore the stretcher, then the face that he felt more and more unfamiliar with, even thought he had known it for the longest time since the apocalypse.

“Where is Zhuo?”

“He is dead.” Qing Shui walked beside the stretcher and pointed at one stretcher near Chang. “He is over there, can you see it?”

Following Qing Shui’s finger, Change first saw Jing, who lay on a stretcher with mud and blood smeared on her face. Then, he saw Zhuo. Zhuo seemed like he had died in extreme pain as his eyes were almost popping out of his eye sockets. His expression was also honestly telling his very last feeling: he couldn’t believe the way he had died.

“How did he die?”

Chang glanced at Qing Shui, recalling that unrealistic experience.

“Mind Suspension.” Qing Shui maintained his calm expression.

“Then why are you saving his corpse?”

“For research, he’s valuable.”

Chang glanced at the former dictator again, lying back on his stretcher. “How is Jing?”

“Concussion. Don’t worry, I’ll take care of her.” Qing Shui’s voice was full of confidence that he didn’t have before. It was also the first time that Chang had heard him talk like this. As if Zhuo’s death broke a cage, freeing the eagle to firmament. Qing Shui’s ambition was no longer hidden.

“Please,”—Chang turned over, facing Qing Shui with his back—“can you fix my face as well? I want to live a normal life again.”

“For sure. I can reconstruct your face with synthetic bones, they come from my breeding ranch. It’s the best material available, and it’ll grow into your own bones, making your face look exactly the same as before...”

“No, no, no...” Hearing the word “synthetic” sickened Chang. “What about a metal one? I don’t want to use synthetics”

“Not a problem, but the metal one is just not as good as the synthetic, it might affect your ability to make expressions.”

“I don’t care, as long as I have a face,” Chang replied, closing his eyes.

The two sunk into silence.

It lasted until they went through the jungle again and returned to Zhengzhou. Chang broke the ice. “Where is Zhizhi?”

“That female EM with great olfactory sensitivity?” Qing Shui asked.

“Yes.” Chang turned around to face Qing Shui. Apparently he cared about his comrade.

“She is dead, too. The explosion caused her internal bleeding, it was too late, she didn’t make it.” Qing Shui’s tone was cold, without any trace of sympathy.

“Really?” Receiving the grievous news of the person that was close to him in the past month, Chang was choked with inaudible sobs. He lost his strength from frustration, his feeble arms dropping down.

“I’m sorry.” Qing Shui patted Chang’s shoulder, then he took out a piece of finger from his pocket. “Hers, I saved it for you.”

“Thank you.” Chang stared at the well trimmed nail, thinking of Zhizhi, who had a boyish charm and personality. Tears swirled in his eye sockets but never fell down.

To leave Chang a moment alone, Qing Shui sped up to lead the troop, his figure receding in the distance.

Time passed with the complicated yet calm atmosphere.

Upon returning to the institute, Chang and Jing were sent to the ward that Qing Shui had specially arranged for them, and they were taken care of by the best physician when Qing Shui left for three days.

Within three days, the leading structure was demolished and rebuilt. Zhuo had completely become history, and the name of Qing Shui began to spread around Zhengzhou.

He rectified and reformed the military and the government in three days, and then returned to the ward with honor and grace, where he found Jing and Chang awaiting him.

Chapter 107: Qing Shui And Zhuo

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When the canvas lost the last star, Chang regained his consciousness. His face first wrenched with pain, but in the next second, he opened his eyes.

“Ah!”

Besides the red fog, endless green was the first thing he saw. The plants were about seven meters above him. While glancing over them, Chang also sensed the jolting.

“Are you awake?”

A familiar face obstructed the greenery. When the dizziness retreated, Chang realized it was Qing Shui, who had his gentle smile back on his face.

“... Yep!”

The jolting came from the stretcher. Chang supported himself with his elbows to sit up while bearing pains from all over the body. He looked left and right at the soldiers who bore the stretcher, then the face that he felt more and more unfamiliar with, even thought he had known it for the longest time since the apocalypse.

“Where is Zhuo?”

“He is dead.” Qing Shui walked beside the stretcher and pointed at one stretcher near Chang. “He is over there, can you see it?”

Following Qing Shui’s finger, Change first saw Jing, who lay on a stretcher with mud and blood smeared on her face. Then, he saw Zhuo. Zhuo seemed like he had died in extreme pain as his eyes were almost popping out of his eye sockets. His expression was also honestly telling his very last feeling: he couldn’t believe the way he had died.

“How did he die?”

Chang glanced at Qing Shui, recalling that unrealistic experience.

“Mind Suspension.” Qing Shui maintained his calm expression.

“Then why are you saving his corpse?”

“For research, he’s valuable.”

Chang glanced at the former dictator again, lying back on his stretcher. “How is Jing?”

“Concussion. Don’t worry, I’ll take care of her.” Qing Shui’s voice was full of confidence that he didn’t have before. It was also the first time that Chang had heard him talk like this. As if Zhuo’s death broke a cage, freeing the eagle to firmament. Qing Shui’s ambition was no longer hidden.

“Please,”—Chang turned over, facing Qing Shui with his back—“can you fix my face as well? I want to live a normal life again.”

“For sure. I can reconstruct your face with synthetic bones, they come from my breeding ranch. It’s the best material available, and it’ll grow into your own bones, making your face look exactly the same as before...”

“No, no, no...” Hearing the word “synthetic” sickened Chang. “What about a metal one? I don’t want to use synthetics”

“Not a problem, but the metal one is just not as good as the synthetic, it might affect your ability to make expressions.”

“I don’t care, as long as I have a face,” Chang replied, closing his eyes.

The two sunk into silence.

It lasted until they went through the jungle again and returned to Zhengzhou. Chang broke the ice. “Where is Zhizhi?”

“That female EM with great olfactory sensitivity?” Qing Shui asked.

“Yes.” Chang turned around to face Qing Shui. Apparently he cared about his comrade.

“She is dead, too. The explosion caused her internal bleeding, it was too late, she didn’t make it.” Qing Shui’s tone was cold, without any trace of sympathy.

“Really?” Receiving the grievous news of the person that was close to him in the past month, Chang was choked with inaudible sobs. He lost his strength from frustration, his feeble arms dropping down.

“I’m sorry.” Qing Shui patted Chang’s shoulder, then he took out a piece of finger from his pocket. “Hers, I saved it for you.”

“Thank you.” Chang stared at the well trimmed nail, thinking of Zhizhi, who had a boyish charm and personality. Tears swirled in his eye sockets but never fell down.

To leave Chang a moment alone, Qing Shui sped up to lead the troop, his figure receding in the distance.

Time passed with the complicated yet calm atmosphere.

Upon returning to the institute, Chang and Jing were sent to the ward that Qing Shui had specially arranged for them, and they were taken care of by the best physician when Qing Shui left for three days.

Within three days, the leading structure was demolished and rebuilt. Zhuo had completely become history, and the name of Qing Shui began to spread around Zhengzhou.

He rectified and reformed the military and the government in three days, and then returned to the ward with honor and grace, where he found Jing and Chang awaiting him.

Chapter 108: Upset

“Are you ready? If so, we shall proceed with the operation.”

Chang’s face was fully exposed under the shadowless lamp, his wounds and dried blood unconcealed from Qing Shui.

“I am.”

Chang nodded.

An anesthetic mask hovered over Chang’s face, then the light overhead started to grow fainter, and eventually the darkness became absolute.

The operation was a success. One month later, the bandage was removed from Chang’s face, and it was exactly the same as before thanks to Qing Shui’s technique.

“Chang, Qing Shui is good at this, isn’t he?”

For some reason, Jing had stopped calling Qing Shui as Mr. Li and started using his first name.

Yet Chang was reluctant to correct her.

“I always knew he was good at this, but I do find it difficult to make expressions.”

The person in the mirror attempted to make a smile, but failed.

“Well, you insisted on using the metal bones, I’m pretty sure it would have been better to implant the synthetic ones,” Jing said, jumping on his back.

Standing in front of the mirror, Chang turned his face from left to right, checking his ‘new’ appearance.

“Thinking of the synthetic bones... They remind me of the gene-altered soldiers, and that upsets me.” Chang heaved a sigh. “I don’t want to become one of them. What about you, do you feel better, has the headache passed?”

“It’s better now.”

“Do you want to get rid of the scar as well? The red color and the shape... it looks like a centipede. You’ll look much prettier without the scar.”

His finger caressed along the bulging scar, which started from her cheek and went down to the neck.

“No, I don’t want to. The scar commemorates how we met. It reminds me of the light that you turned into.”

“Light?”

“Exactly, you were that light that cut through the seamless darkness. This is how I think of you since the first time we met.”

Jing put up a straight face.

“What a fitting comparison!” While Chang and Jing were talking, a familiar figure entered the room. “Humans perceive the surroundings as darkness when they’re desperate. And the light of hope often leaves the most profound effect in one’s memory.”

“Mr. Li, what brings you here?”

Seeing Qing Shui coming, Chang attempted to welcome him with a warm smile, but after pursing his lips for a few time, he still felt inadequate in making the expression. Thus, he returned to his still face, but his words were said with ardor. “I haven’t seen you for almost a month during my recovery, how are you? You must be busy.”

“Not too bad, but I do have documents stacked up on my desk,” Qing Shui answered with a nod. “I heard that you are removing the bandage today, and felt obligated to see you. After all, you two are my only family now.”

“Thank you.”

Perhaps because they hadn’t talked for a while, Chang felt like there was a distance between him and the person who he had went

through death with.

“Leave those polite words behind, please. No matter what I will turn into, you two are the purest spots in my heart.”

Qing Shui's hand squeezed Chang's shoulder, and he stepped forward to mess with Jing's hair, but the latter avoided it.

“Jing, we are not as close as we used to be.” His hand stopped in the air awkwardly, Qing Shui was only able to force a laugh through his thin lips. “You're a grown-up now.”

“What have you come for?”

Jing stepped back, her eyes showing distrust.

“I thought I told you why I'm here. First, it's to visit the brand new Chang, and the second reason...” Qing Shui's face returned to a calm state, his eyes remaining on Jing. “I have a question for you.”

“What question?” Jing asked in reply.

“A question about your perception.” Qing Shui stepped forward and hunkered down. “A month ago, on the day we went to the Yellow River, did you sense anything strange in your perception range?”

“Anything strange?” Jing was confused.

“Yes, something strange.” Qing Shui tilted his head backward, looking at the ceiling and recalling. “When I was on the peak, I felt quite disturbed to be honest. But I can’t be sure what caused it.”

“Disturbed?” Chang, too, was puzzled. “It shouldn’t be, I thought you were well-prepared.”

Perhaps people other than Chang wouldn’t understand how capable Qing Shui was now, but he knew that fact very well. “How could you possibly be disturbed? By any chance, were you just nervous?”

“I don’t think so, my emotions were under control.” Qing Shui was as calm as still water. “As you said, I was well prepared. I was certain about my plan, and that shouldn’t have arised any uneasiness. From what I understand, my disturbance came from when I collect the information from the surroundings. To explain it better, a good example is a person in a place which harbours malicious intentions. The person probabaly doesn’t know what is going on but he can sense it, and that’s the source of the disturbance.

“The feeling didn’t come from nowhere; it was rather my instincts. The information collected from the environment may not have turned into something that I was aware of, but it could have come from a glance, or an expression. All together they produced that werid experience.

“Myself, I’m much more sensitive in terms of collecting these hardly visible emotions, and I tend to analyse them more often than non-EMs. Therefore, my agitation must have come from somewhere,” Qing Shui explained, frowning. “However, even though I’ve sorted out my memories numerous times, I still failed to find that source.

“My conclusion is: the source of disturbance is unknown,” Qing Shui said, looking at Jing’s eyes. “Or, that it is something uncontrollable. I’ve been thinking, could it be an invisible organism that watched me as a bystander?”

“Invisible?”

Jing rolled her eyes while recalling bits and pieces from that day.

Both Chang and Qing Shui stopped talking, to leave a moment of silence for Jing.

“There is something unusual.” Jing was drawn back from reminiscence after four minutes. “On that day, a hole or a zone that was shielded from my perception appeared for a second.”

“What zone?” Qing Shui was intrigued.

“Let me explain. In my perception, if there is absolutely no life in a range, it is pure darkness, but I’m still monitoring everything.” Jing struggled to explain how she usually perceived danger. “It is just like how we walk at night. Although it is dark, the darkness is

something that exists for real, and so we can move through it.

“But on that day, I found that there was a hole in my perception range, that I had completely lost grasp of it.”

Chapter 109: Almighty Human

“It was just like a blind spot expanded from out of nowhere; I could sense nothing from it,” Jing said. “However, that blind spot only existed for less than a second, so I thought it was just my imagination. If you hadn’t asked me today, I would have forgotten about it altogether.”

“I see.” Qing Shui nodded to himself, as if having found the source of the disturbance. “Can you tell me more about the blind spot? Was it the same feeling as when you met the Willow?”

“No, it’s different. On the day we met the Willow, my perception to danger was intact. It’s just that I simply couldn’t sense the Willow even when we were in front of it. Everything else worked just fine, I could sense all the other organism around us.” Other than fear, the impression that the Willow had left to Jing was more of confusion and puzzlement. “It was a weird feeling of it being there, in front of my eyes, but not giving out any hint of its existence, as if it was lifeless.”

“Perhaps its life has turned into another form that we’re yet to understand.” Qing Shui raised his head upon mulling over the mystery. “I feel much better now, and it’s time for me to leave. You guys need some serious rest, and I’m actually quite busy these days. Take care of yourselves, alright?”

“Just feel free to ask me for anything, as long as I’m capable of it.” Qing Shui’s hand gently patted Chang’s back again, reassuring. “And... I’m also searching for your parents and relatives, I’ve even sent troops to contact Kaifeng, so take your time resting here.”

“No worries, thank you.” Chang waved his hand in goodbye, when he recalled something suddenly. “Wait, don’t leave yet, I’ve had something in mind that I needed to ask you about.”

While speaking, Chang’s hand reached into the inner pocket of his shirt, taking out a small syringe. “What is this that you gave me before I went to scrutinize Zhuo’s field?”

“It’s pretty similar to what Zhuo has done, but I’ve taken it to another level.” Qing Shui laughed. “It can activate the gene information that is hidden in our genome. It’s my greatest work so far, make good use of it. I was going to tell you about it later, but since you’ve asked, I’ll explain it now.

“The solution in this syringe promotes generation of mRNA that I designed for you, and eventually, the modification process will change your body pattern.”

“What does that mean?” Chang wanted to contract the muscles of his forehead to frown, but realizing that he had no control over his facial muscles. “Can you tell me what it does in simple words? The easier, the better.”

“Alright, basically what it does is that it will change your morphology, depending on what I wanted to bring about. It will give you a second chance at growing limbs, skins, horns... you name it. Anything that you desire to have on you,” Qing Shui explained in the simplest way he could make it. “From the bottom of the evolution tree, lives started as unicellular organism, then

changed to multicellular organisms. Later, we had fish, amphibians... and at last, humans evolved from primates. If we were to go way back in time, we all share the same ancestor - the unicellular organism.”

“I understand this.”

Chang nodded.

“That also means that our gene shares a certain degree of similarity to fishes, amphibians, even animals under Cnidarian phylum,” Qing Shui said.. “You probably didn’t know about this fact, but when you think about it,, the key difference between us and them is that at a certain point in time, our evolution went in different directions.”

“And then?”

Chang was eager to know more.

“Then, even nowadays, we as humans often label ourselves as the most intelligent species on this planet, sometimes even arrogantly calling ourselves the rulers of the evolution tree. Indeed, our hands and brains are far more advanced than of other species, but we also need to admit the fact that on the journey of evolution, we sacrificed some functions in exchange for our flexible hands and brains that generate thoughts and ideas. That is to say, we lost the ability to swim as fast as a fish; we lost the ability to adapt to the nature as skillfully as amphibians; we also lost the ability to repair injuries as well as Cnidarians.”

“Because evolution is simply a choice, perfection is unachievable. A giraffe cannot burrow under a bush because of its height—this is the end result of natural selection and the law of use and disuse. There won’t be lives in nature that are perfect because of evolution.”

As Qing Shui was speaking, he chuckled. “Therefore, during this process, the coding DNA that humans have is less than 10%, and this number varies depending on how scientists measure it. In other words, we have more than 90% of junk DNA that isn’t functioning, and we can make use of it.

“What we have displayed, such as our appearance, our limbs, our language abilities, we call it Original Patterns. What we are going to add on, such as the ability to breathe underwater, heat and cold resistance, even cloning, we call them Modified Patterns.

“The syringe I gave you could modify your non-coding genes, especially by adding Hox genes, which could change the morphology of a species. With this, we can attain more features and abilities that we dream to have.” Qing Shui laughed again. “Therefore, I called it Modifier, it does what it sounds like.”

“Marvelous!” Chang exclaimed. Qing Shui’s introduction changed the whole basis of what a human should be. “So with the Modifier, we may be able to fly, stride under the water, gain strength effortlessly, and even... and even become bulletproof?”

Animals other than human had countless features, and yet

humans ruled the world with only one type of gene sequencing. Chang couldn't imagine what humanity would look like in the future when genes were modified to gain certain morphologies.

The most important thing was that, it wasn't a crude alternation as how Zhuo had done it. Qing Shui's method was to rearrange the existing genes and make use of that. Rather than alternation, such method was more efficient.

“Any side effects of the Modifier?”

Chang shook the syringe.

“There shouldn't be any in theory, but I haven't tried it yet.” Qing Shui took the syringe back. “The formula is extremely delicate to proportions, it took me over a month to make this. Especially with Zhuo monitoring me. It drained my sleeping time since then the surveillance was the weakest.

“Keep it, this syringe contains my best efforts. I'm still making improvements on the formula and testing it out. Until I confirm its safety, don't use it yet as Zhuo is no longer a threat.”

Chang took the syringe back, placing it back in his pocket, and pressed on the cloth to assure himself of its presence.

“I have other meetings scheduled for now. I'll send someone to inform you when the Modifier is ready.”

“You should go now, don’t worry about me.”

Chang nodded to Qing Shui’s back. He wouldn’t waste any second of this man.

Qing Shui turned his head, blinking and said goodbye to Chang and Jing.

This time, he once again left for a long time.

During this period, Chang and Jing weren’t assigned to any specific mission and were allowed to own their free time. Most of the time Chang spent his day in the gym while Jing was always beside him.

They were treated as special guests in the institute, nearly all the officers regardless of their ranking approving all their requests in a snap. They were also allowed accessing to almost anywhere they wanted to, and of course, they enjoyed the best meals and residence.

There was only one place they were forbidden to approach.

It was Qing Shui’s lab, whose previous owner was Group Alpha.

Qing Shui didn’t give a particular reason why they were forbidden to enter his lab, but Chang learned of the arrangement once when looking for his friend.

Nobody in the institute dared to displease Chang, but the attitude of the entrance guards implied Qing Shui's command. Although Chang was perplexed, he freed his mind from suspecting his friend's motivation.

After all, Qing Shui was at a different place and position now, not to mention the lab was a place only for researchers. Chang was merely a civilian, so the need to access the lab seemed unreasonable as he didn't have a purpose of conducting any sort of research. Thus, after he was refused the second time, he tactfully avoided the lab.

The whole institute was somewhat separated from the chaos, and Chang had a peaceful time under Qing Shui's wings.

The peaceful days ended with a visit from a soldier.

"Mr. Chang Liu?"

The soldier who approached him was a low ranked officer that seemed to be in his twenties. When he decided to ask Chang, the latter was training in the gym. The soldier also bowed with respect.

"Who are you?"

Placing down the dumbbells, Chang turned his head to the voice; the soldier's face reminded him of no one.

“I am a platoon leader in the military, I belong to the department that is in charge of chief’s meal.”

The young soldier smiled.

“I see, what brings you here?” Chang noticed his hesitation in speech and carefully looked at the soldier’s face, then asked, “Have we met before?”

“We did, we passed each other in the hallway a few days ago.”

The young soldier nodded to Chang.

“Alright. So, what brings you here today?” Chang sat down on the bench, patting on the padding. “Have a seat, tell me what happened.”

“Ah... I don’t think...” The young soldier looked around. “I don’t think this is a good place to talk.”

“What is it?” Chang gradually became impatient to the soldier’s furtive attitude. He didn’t want to leave the gym because of this, either.

Even though the institute was comparably less chaotic, there still were power struggles within it. Chang didn’t loosen his guard even if he was living in peace, since he knew that Qing Shui was both his

wings and his encumbrance. He was free from trouble thanks to Qing Shui, but at the same time, once the trouble came up to him, it wouldn't be something that easy to deal with.

Chapter 110: She Is Alive

“Just tell me here, there is nothing that you need to hide.”

Chang straightened his back but didn't stand up.

The soldier gave up on his persuasions, keeping in mind Chang's position. He could only lower his voice before saying, “Alright, but please don't tell others that I've talked to you about this.”

“No problem.”

Chang nodded.

“Do you know about Officer He?”

The platoon leader made his voice almost inaudible, worrying that what he said next would be heard by people in the gym other than Chang.

“You mean, Zhizhi? What happened?”

Chang was surprised that the platoon leader would mention someone that had died in that battle.

“She was my childhood friend, we grew up in the same neighbourhood.” The soldier kept his voice low. “She was one of my best friends.”

“Alright. Then?” Chang struggled to tighten his rigid brow muscles to make an expression. “What do you want to tell me?”

“I was trying to... trying to let you know that she is not dead.”

“Are you sure?” The soldier’s words shocked Chang, and the finger bone pendant on his chest shook. “It’s impossible, Qing Shui told me that she died in the explosion.”

“She is still alive!” the platoon leader whispered in Chang’s ear. “I saw her with my own eyes! She is in Chief Li’s lab, immersed in some kind of chemical.”

“Immersed?” Chang recalled that when he requested to see Zhizhi’s corpse, he was informed that corpses from the battlefield were being well handled. “How are you sure about her condition?”

“She twitched. I wasn’t from electroshock but a voluntary twitch, she must not have died!” The soldier looked around to make sure no one was paying attention to their conversation. “Please, don’t tell others that I’ve talked to you about Zhizhi, otherwise I won’t be able to see tomorrow’s sunrise.”

“How can Qing Shui be so cruel...” Chang pressed his face into his palms. “Then what is the difference between him and Zhuo?”

“I don’t think he is the second Zhuo. I was just saying the worst possible consequence. Chief Li has a gentle disposition and we all

know that. He must have his own reasons to keep the truth away from you.” The platoon leader lowered his head. “Now that I’ve told you Chief Li’s secret, my life is in your hands if the secret slips out. So please don’t tell anyone about this.”

Chang promised to keep the secret, then asked, “How did you know I was close to Officer He?”

“I’ve been prying to seek people she was on good terms with.” The soldier smiled. “Although my ranking isn’t as high as Officer He’s, I know her better than almost anyone else. And quite a lot of people who participated in that battle saw you and Zhizhi standing close to each other, so it wasn’t hard to tell the relationship between you and her.

“I saw her alive on the battlefield, but as a platoon leader myself, I really couldn’t do anything... The only person who can save her in this institute is Chief Li, and I think you might be the only person who can change his mind.” The platoon leader’s voice was both begging and requesting. “So please save her!”

“Well, of course I’ll figure something out if what you just told me is true.” Chang nodded in agreement. “You should leave now. You might get into trouble if you’re seen in contact with me too often.

“Especially if I’m planning to talk to him about this in a few days, you wouldn’t want it to be known that we’ve talked, would you?”

As if the soldier was reminded of something, he stood up and left hastily, without saying goodbye.

The soldier's back disappeared behind a corner, and Chang was left to dwell on his thoughts.

He had become more mature through experience, no longer that naive high school kid from a couple months ago. A series of lives and deaths taught him to bear emotions with forbearance. Even though he was overjoyed at the news about Zhizhi, he didn't lose his rationale and run to Qing Shui immediately.

Qing Shui had changed, and he knew that.

However, no matter how much a person had changed, he would still be restrained by feelings of camaraderie. Chang pondered for days to unearth a way to rescue Zhizhi without hurting their bond.

Few days later.

"Jing, Chang, it's been a while since last time we saw each other." At dusk, Qing Shui passed by their room with a basket of fruits. "A new type of fruit that's a natural product, free from artificial elements. It has the taste of an apricot but at the same time is as aromatic as an apple. A patroller found it at the edge of the jungle, and it's delicious. I thought I should bring you guys some."

Qing Shui's voice had an uplifting tone. It was rare that he couldn't stop talking. After stepping into the room, he placed the basket on the desk. "Try it! Jing, come try it!"

“Okay.”

Jing left her unfinished painting behind, joining Chang and Qing Shui. She grabbed a tangerine fruit from the basket and took a crispy bite.

The unique aroma filled the room.

“It does taste good!” Chang too grabbed one from the basket, smiling. “You’ve been talking, what’s got you in such a good mood?”

“Remember the Modifier I talked to you about the other day? I confirmed the safety of the formula from the test results of rats and human subjects. None of my participants were negatively impacted or bothered by the side-effects.” Qing Shui continued to smile. “The gene sequence rearrangement is a process, so it’ll take some time. But the syringe I gave you is safe to inject.”

“That’s good new to hear.”

Chang took out the syringe that had been securely kept in the pocket.

“Yours is the most sophisticated one I made. The pureness of the red fog concentrate and the accurateness to portion was more than a hundred times better than what I used for testing.” Qing Shui chortled. “Let’s wait until the Modifier takes its full effect, you’ll

be much more powerful than Zhuo's gene-altered soldiers."

"Thank you, Qing Shui, thank you."

Chang curved the corner of his mouth, putting back the syringe into his pocket. He was interrupted when he was about to mention Zhizhi.

"There is no need to say thank you between you and me. You must have something on your mind, am I correct?" Qing Shui asked, looking at Chang.

"I can't hide it, can I?" His face had sold Chang's secret away, but he knew that he couldn't hide from the reality, either. "I've been thinking about this for a few days, and it seems it's the right time to talk about this.

"Jing, can you stay in the room? We're heading out for a brief talk." Chang's hesitation was obvious, and hence Qing Shui pulled him out from the room to somewhere private.

"Tell me, what is it?"

"Zhizhi, do you remember her?" Chang rephrased his request in the hallway. "Can you let her go?"

Chapter 111: Four Years

"Well..." Qing Shui sunk into a brief moment of silence. He didn't remark about Zhizhi's death but smiled instead. "You know that she is still alive."

"I do," Chang agreed. "We lived together for some time, I just don't believe that she could've died that way."

"She couldn't, however, if I hadn't conducted my research on her, she would've been dead a long time ago. I didn't lie to you about the internal bleeding from the rupture of viscera." Qing Shui stood up, patting Chang's shoulder. "But then, since you've asked about this, I can't betray your expectations. When the sun rises up tomorrow, I'll take her to you."

"Thanks." Chang nodded. "Can I ask you something? Why did you choose Zhizhi as your experiment subject?"

"There wasn't any particular reason. I didn't know her beforehand, and she worked under Zhuo at the time, so I felt less burdened using her," Qing Shui answered calmly. "That was my first reason; and the second is that EMs are rare, especially in the sensory category. We only have two or three of them here, and that's why I developed an interest in her."

"After all, her ability is closely related to my current project - the Modifier. I was thinking that her mutation must have some sort of relationship with gene sequence. Thus, she made herself a great subject." As Qing Shui spoke, his voice became lower and lower.

"When I found her on the battlefield, she was indeed lingering on her last breath. I wasn't confident about whether she could make it or not. Please, don't blame me on this.

"I knew that she was your comrade, and I'm still conscience-stricken because I've tested on her."

"Don't feel guilty about it. I'm just glad that you're willing to let her go." Chang heaved a sigh, saying, "We all have our own plans and thoughts, and I'm forever grateful that you always make a concession on mine."

"Thank you, Chang."

The skin around Qing Shui's eyes wrinkled as he smiled.

"But... I don't want to live in the institute anymore," Chang said. "Here... It's not somewhere I belong to. I'm vigilant every second in the institute even if you're here. I want to live outside this place."

"No problem, you can do whatever you want to. Let's keep in touch. When you are in trouble, or need help, don't forget that I'm here. I can offer you food and weapons, anything that you ask for." Qing Shui lowered his head. "I just hope that our brotherhood doesn't end today."

"I understand that, Zhizhi is neither me nor Jing, and she's just a nobody to you, so there is no reason for you to take care of her

anyway." Chang smiled wryly. "I think this is what they call politics. And politics and friendship should never collide with each other."

"So what's your plan after you get out?"

Qing Shui quietly avoided the topic, lit a cigarette for Chang, and handed it to him.

Chang took the cigarette between his fingers, taking a deep inhale so that the nicotine reached the bottom of his lungs. "I don't have one yet, we'll see. I'll inject the Modifier before I leave, then, I think my ability can at least keep me from starvation."

"I do believe that, after all, you found your own way to survive even in Kaifeng." Qing Shui's smile was warm. "About the Modifier, I have to remind you that the rearrangement of your gene sequences is a prolonged process, it won't have instant effects. And I only learned that recently.

"For example, if you were to develop a sensitive olfactory system that skews at the right end of the normal distribution, you have to have more olfactory cells grow in your body. That means, even if your gene sequences are successfully modified, it will still take time to transform the structure. Only when you have a functional feature will the transformation be completed. Fish without gills can't survive underwater.

"This is what I found these days. The effect cycle of the Modifier is as long as your life, so prepare yourself before the injection."

"Understood." Chang nodded. "Take good care of yourself as well after we leave here."

"Don't worry. No one would dare to touch me except for that source of the disturbance. No one is capable of causing harm to me." Mentioning himself in the conversation, Qing Shui seemed reluctant. "I feel like that disturbance is targeting me as I can always feel its presence these days. It's been wandering around the institute."

"What do you think it is?"

"I've no idea, but that means it's a formidable life form. It seemed to be interested in my research, which means it's intelligent." Qing Shui smiled. "It's always observing me from far away, but it never initiates a rash approach."

"You aren't intimidated, are you?" Chang asked with deep concern.

"No need to worry, it is prudent. And I've also planned my counter-move. However, it's always looking at me, perhaps my genetic research intrigues it," Qing Shui said. "And then I was thinking, maybe it's looking into ways of reproduction."

"Reproduction?"

"A life form like it has a low chance of mutation, and it must have

gone through a rapid evolution during that period. The odds of another organism evolved in the same path that it has gone through is infinitely small, thus, it is one of a kind. That being said, it can't mate with an opposite sex of its kind because there is none. No matter how intimidating it is, it's still a singular organism that can't cause harm on a large scale, unless it is the Willow."

Qing Shui then continued, "Though, I don't think it is the Willow. Then thing is just learning how to reproduce. From his behavioral pattern, it's not its first time approaching a human."

"What will you do now? To deal with the unknown," Chang asked.

"I'll do nothing. It's good at disguising itself, and I don't see a chance of capturing it. I can only sense its presence by the feeling of being disturbed dangling in my heart, which is almost always here," Qing Shui replied. "However, you don't need to worry about me at all. Firstly, if it's as intelligent as I think it to be, it should never show itself. And secondly, if it reveals its identity to me, it's doomed to die."

"Good to hear all that." Chang nodded for one last time. "My mind is at rest as long as you're safe."

"I'll bring her to you tomorrow morning. And I'll contact you when the news about your relatives comes."

"Thanks."

"I should leave, take a good rest." Qing Shui took back the half of the cigarette and inhaled until his lungs bloated up. He squeezed out the last bit of flare on the windowsill and left without looking back.

The next morning.

Zhizhi was escorted to Chang's room when the sun rose up. One of her arms was lost in the spider den and one of her remaining fingers hung on Chang's pendant.

Zhizhi seemed to have recovered well from the explosion but her eyes were fatigued. Her expression turned grateful when she saw Chang standing in the hallway.

"I'm leaving with Jing, do you want to join us?"

A full washed-out backpack was on his back, and Jing was sitting on his forearm, though Chang's facial muscles were still rigid.

"Let's go together."

Zhizhi nodded.

"Alright."

Chang took the lead to step out of the institute.

Officer He followed suit without saying a word. The moment they 'escaped' from the institute, emotions surged in waves in their minds.

They had fled from the eye of the storm, and being away from which would lead them to a long period of peaceful life. Of course, it was merely an inner peace and temporary, from being freed from the political struggles. However, the rivalry between humans and nature was not going to stop, challenges would come repeatedly, leaving humans no time to take a breath.

The pace of global evolution won't take a rest for anyone. Species who occupied this planet would continue to evolve and mutate, leading to a more complicated food web.

Yet it was still unknown whether humanity would be dragged down from the throne.

...

Four years later.

In the city of Zhengzhou

Inside the Chortle.

"Yo! Where are the strippers?" some drunkard swaying his

tankard shouted out. "We live on the policy made in the Institute, selling them the new species that we found in the jungle. After all that hard work, you're telling me that there is no stripper performance? What kind of sh*tty bar is this!"

"This bar is clean, they don't provide services like that," someone reminded the boisterous drunk, and his just as lively companions. "This is a place for drinks only, we never saw strippers here. I bet you've came from another Area."

"First time here, we came all the way from Area 2." The mercenaries burst out into vulgar laughter. "We had no idea that there was a bar at a backstreet like this, but once we saw it, we knew that there should be some nice services provided in a place like this. I'm really disappointed now, I want my strippers!"

One of the mercs hammered onto the table, cleaving out a hole. The quake sent the tankards crashing to the ground.

"You better not incur unnecessary troubles. We all know who takes care of this bar," the person on the next table continued to warn them. "Perhaps it's an urban legend, but we heard that the owner is close to the military, and he's on good terms with the higher ups. Some juvenile gang attempted to merge this bar with theirs once but on the next day, their leader was beheaded, and his corpse was fed to the tentacle monster in the sewage... You better behave yourselves..."

It seemed like the person was reminding them with good intentions but his tone was actually threatening. Anyone with a clear mind would notice his provocation.

As expected, the outsiders were enraged by his remarks. One of the drunkest stood up on his chair, shouting with anger, "F*ck this sh*t. Everybody has some sort of connections these days, and they're all yelling that they ain't afraid of death. They're all liars, liars!

"My name is [Sanpang Mo](#), I shall see who dares to challenge me!"

The meaning behind Sanpang Mo's name: 'Mo' is his last name, 'San' means third and 'pang' means fat or chubby.

The man behaved with unbearable insolence, attracting attention from everyone in the bar.

Chapter 112: Monkat

As the man had said, Sanpang's arrogance was ignored by both the bartenders and the waiters.

Sanpang lost his interest when the boredom of being ignored hit him. He stepped down from the chair, and started boasting about his achievement, "Listen, listen. What I got in the jungle is incredibly valuable, because I found a kind of insect that had just evolved..."

Sanpang kept flaunting himself, and that attracted the attention of a one-armed woman who had a hook installed on her stump. She supported her chin with the heel of her other hand, listening as if the stories told were also experienced by a person that stayed in her heart.

At the same time.

Something tense was happening in the jungle.

A troop fell into a trap, and some of the members were tied up by ropes that had been buried under the dry leaves on the ground. All of those caught were hung upside down, and they started crying out of fear.

"What!"

"Ah!"

"What is it?"

Those men bawled.

"Someone untie us! Who set this trap up? F*ck this sh*t!" A man hung between the branches, shouting to his comrades underneath beneath him. "Get me loose! I'm already having a bad day for getting lost in the jungle at night."

"Hey! Someone answer me!"

Those men who hung upside down could only see red and blue colors through the optic goggles that they had bought from the institute.

Looking through the shrouding red fog, their companies didn't instantly rescue them from the trap but stood still, as if they were alerted by something moving around them.

"Hey! I said..."

Those men hurried their companies, but then a few bulbous lumps bulged out from underneath the ground. A kind of animal that had a strange appearance poked out from one of the lumps, then another, and another.

"There's something coming from beneath the ground!"

Those who stood on the ground were stabbed by the organisms that sprang up from below. Their height was up to an adult's abdomen.

"Monkats! They're monkats! Run! Run!" the mercenary shouted out, firing his repeaters towards monkats. Some of these fierce animals that had monkey bodies with rat faces and claws were shot immediately.

Yet monkats were fearless and obsessed with fighting. They didn't mourn for their companions' deaths but got excited by blood. They squeaked even louder while throwing their wooden spears at the mercenaries, and those crude weapons penetrated through one of the men's chests.

"Don't touch their spears! They're poisoned!" A man who knew about the monkats called for withdrawal. "Run! They aren't something that easy to deal with," the man shouted out, fleeing.

However, a monkat threw a fruit-like object and hit his chest.

The fruit exploded upon impact, releasing green mist from within. The person couldn't help but inhale a bit of that mist out of shock and fear, and then fainted.

The monkat which had hit its target with the fruit squeaked with pride.

Those who hung upside-down refrained from shouting, instead, they bent up to reach for their daggers that were hidden in their boots to cut the ropes. However, wooden spears rained on them, scratching their skins when passing by. All of the mercenaries began to twitch when the poison entered their systems.

For those who were on the ground, the fight with monkats wasn't enjoyable or blood-boiling—they withdrew to the jungle while dodging the spears.

The leader of monkats squeaked loudly again when it saw the humans fleeing in all directions. His subordinates followed the command by jumping off the trees to the ground. They were rolling over the obstacles, springing between the bushes with great speed. Monkats were no doubt much more flexible than monkeys from before the apocalypse.

Apparently, humans were disadvantaged when competing in speed. Besides, even nowadays they could only see two meters further with the optic goggles, while monkats were gifted with night vision.

The mercenaries simply couldn't get away from their pursuers.

There was a great disparity in strength, given that one side was fleeing with limited vision and speed.

So the mercenaries collapsed one by one from the wooden spears thrown from overhead, and it wasn't even a long distance later that there were only three or four remaining.

More and more monkats joined this human hunt.

The never ending rustling sound from all around broke the surviving mercenaries' last nerve.

"Brother, we're going to die."

One of the survivors ran slower and slower, eventually stopping with a tear-stricken face, sobbing.

"Don't cry, dad told us that we should never fear nature." The other one also stopped. He threw away his repeater, taking out a few grenades. "Here, we must take some of those bastards to hell with us. We must let them know that humans aren't easy to deal with, either."

"Brother..." The boy who seemed to be only eighteen years old took the grenades from his brother's hand. He clenched his teeth to cheer himself up, repeating, "Fear is more dreadful than death, fear is more dreadful than death. Papa told us that fear is more dreadful than death. I'm not afraid, I'm not scared."

He murmured to himself again and again, until his face blushed due to agitation. When he was about to pull out the security to release the grenade, a deafening sound echoed through the jungle.

BOOM!

The noise must have been produced by a heavy caliber weapon, and a weapon meant that someone was using it. The boy who had heard the gunshot lowered his hand, holding the grenade as if gripping a life-saving straw.

A deep voice came from the source of the gunshots.

"Hold on."

They were just two words but they granted hope for the boy to resist. He put away the grenade and picked up his repeater again. The deep voice of that man vanished, but a different kind of rustling sound replaced it.

The noise was different to the one made by monkats. Although it sounded like the one making it had a bigger body size, it was much more agile. A massive angel flying through the woods.

When that agile figure made brief stops, there would be shrieks emitting from monkats.

When the boy heard a shriek for the eighteenth time, meaning the death of the eighteenth monkat, a man descended from a tree crown, suddenly arriving in front of the boys.

The man dressed in a camouflage uniform was expressionless. He didn't wear the optic goggles either, and had brought a live monkat in his hand.

He raised the monkat up high, straightening his arm. As if warning the sinister animals that still lurked in the tree crowns, the man squeezed the monkat's neck, causing it to lose its ability to strike back.

While the man showed off his trophy in the air, the mercenary boy noticed that he took out his giant handgun, pointing at the monkat's head. As if it all happened in slow motion, the boy could see the man's finger draw back, and a bullet of an unusual size bolted out from the muzzle.

BOOM!

The handgun growled, and the monkat's head exploded like a smashed watermelon.

Squeak!

The witnesses of the cruel judgment roared in rage and fear.

Chapter 113: Intimidation

The monkats were raving, angrily hovering over their heads. The rustling sounds made by them caused pin and needles on the boys' scalps. They couldn't understand why this man who had descended from nowhere would intentionally provoke the monkats.

But one thing the boys knew was that the man came to save them. Plus, if he hadn't come in time, they would have already been poisoned and would now be lying on the ground, twitching, jerking in this hopeless jungle until death freed them from the torture. So whatever intentions this man had, they decided to support him anyway.

The deliberate provocation worked - the monkats were enraged.

They screamed shrilly, the sound spreading through the whole area, demanding justice in anger and disappointment. Monkats didn't seem like a species that was good at repressing its emotions.

The shrieking stopped when the monkats begun their attack on the intimidating man with the giant handgun. Spears and poison fruits were hurled toward him.

"Spread out!"

The man pushed the three survivors away. And strangely, the way he propelled them happened to help them to dodge all the spears and fruits. At the same time, the force also pushed the man

backward. As soon as they had all moved out, the spears struck the ground and poison fruits exploded.

"Hold your breath!"

The poison fruits cracked and exploded one by one, releasing the gas within. After saying his piece, the man sprang up from the ground and bounced between the branches, disappearing in the tree crowns once again.

Fifteen seconds later, another desperate squeak called out from the crown, and then the man descended with a victim back down once more.

BOOM!

The man's intentions were clear: he provoked the monkats by shooting his victim in the face again. It was done exactly like the first time.

However, the second provocation turned out to be an intimidation tactic. The screeches were significantly quieter, as if the monkats had sensed that this man was unbeatable. There was a commotion in the monkat crowd, and some of them fled. But the remaining, stubborn ones, went to attack again.

The result of this attack was a swift one.

The man captured another monkat from the tops of the trees,

and with that handgun, its head was busted.

Three identical executions startled the monkats, taking away their desire of crush the humans. They stood on the branches quietly for a moment, then rushed off with fearful screams before the man could fire the handgun for the fourth time.

The man put away his weapon after confirming that the monkats were already a great distance away.

"Thank you! Thank you for saving us."

The three survivors bowed as soon as they confirmed their safety, immensely grateful to the man.

The favor of a saved life was impossible to repay. Even though Zhengzhou state had become a place where all virtues decayed, the gratefulness for saving one's life was never forgotten here.

"No need to say thank you to me. I was just passing by this area and happened to see that you were attacked. As a matter of course, I would help anyone if it's within my capabilities. " The man didn't make any expression. "Do you guys have companions? Why are you hanging around the jungle this late night at night, it's dangerous."

"We... we got lost," one of the survivors explained. "At first, a kind of strange bug assaulted us, and we lost two members who were in charge of keeping the compass. They were gnawed in front

of our eyes, no bones were left... As a result, our formation was broken and we couldn't find where they had dropped the compass, so..."

"Our companions... I think they're poisoned, I'm not sure if there is a way to save them."

"Let me check," the man said, walking toward the trap the mercenaries had fallen for as if he knew what had happened over there.

Even though the three were suspicious about the man's familiarity with the trap, they didn't ask about it. They followed along, abstaining from speaking.

Corpses lay everywhere. The man went up to the bodies to check for signs of breathing. He found two still alive and took out an iron case, retrieving two vials of antidote from it.

"Antidotes, but I'm not sure if it'll work," the man told the survivors, then injected the medicine into those men nearing death.

"Carry them, I'll show you the way out."

Since the antidote was condensed, the process was over in a snap of the fingers. The man left those poison victims to the survivors, preparing to lead everyone to the edge of the jungle.

"Follow me."

The man turned his back to the survivors, who had no choice but to try and catch up with his figure.

It was a journey without any conversation. The man seemed extremely familiar with the jungle, and perhaps they were blessed for they didn't encounter any more dangers along the way. One hour later, the jungle became less dense, and that was a sign that they were safe.

"We've arrived, I need to go now," the man said, standing at the edge of the jungle. "The Zhengzhou state is in front of you. I'm sure that you'll know your way from here."

"We do." The survivors nodded. "Please let us do something for you for saving our lives."

"It's not necessary. I see people die every day, my wish is just to save as many as possible." The man curved his mouth to make a smile, but his muscles were rigid; the smile was strange. "Come grab a drink at the Chortle Bar, I'm the owner."

"Chortle Bar?"

The survivors stared at the unnatural smile.

"Exactly."

"Can you tell me your name by any chance?" the boy asked

"Chang Liu." The man seemed aware of his rigid smile and put on the straight face again. "If those two survive, don't forget to ask them to pay back in the bar. Those antidotes are expensive for their rareness, the market price is about 170 thousand [state yuan](#). Of course, if they don't make it, then don't bother repaying for them."

State Yuan is the new currency that replaces RMB (The original Chinese currency) since the social and political structure has reformed.

Chang waved his hand to those survivors. "I really should go, someone is waiting for me home, see you around."

He sprinted toward the Zhengzhou state, leaving those doubtful survivors behind.

...

In the Chortle Bar.

The place gradually cooled down. Those who aimed to get drunk had achieved their goal; those who wanted to talk had become tired, resting their heads on the tables, murmuring. And that hook-nosed woman who sat in the corner checked the watch on her hand, knowing that it was time to close the bar.

A figure sneaked in when she stood up from the bar stool.

"I'm back."

What entered Chang's sight were those drunk mercenaries, some of whom were asleep while others were murmuring about their plan. At the same time, Chang also noticed the table that was smashed by Sanpang.

"Well, well, well." Chang walked up to those drunk mercenaries, smirking. "We'll ask them to pay for this broken table."

Chapter 114: Socioecology

"The table isn't really worth money." The hook-nosed woman walked up to Chang, smirking. "Why did you come back so late today? The smell of blood is all over you, so let me guess, you encountered those kinds of dangers again?"

"I did. I met a group of mercenaries in the jungle, sadly they were attacked by the monkats. Most of them lost their lives in that fight," Chang said. "Those animals have become much smarter than before, they even know how to make tools and use them."

"Of course, it has been more than four years since that day. What wouldn't happen? I heard that abyssal species are invading coastal cities." The one-armed woman smiled. "The situation in the Central Plain is better as Zhengzhou state is an inland city. Humans in the coastal cities have already went extinct, those who didn't flee inwardly anyway. And the few stubborn ones remaining are completely disadvantaged in this competition with mutated species."

While the woman was speaking, the door was opened again; an abnormal kid with two heads peeked in.

"Please, spare us some food."

"I beg for your mercy, we haven't eaten for days."

The two headed kid spoke in turns, raising her hand with a bowl up high.

Chang only heaved a sigh, looking at the two-headed child. "It's been four years, and those newborns are growing up."

He turned around and took out a pack of biscuits from behind the counter, then put them into her tiny bowl.

"Thank you, thank you very much!"

Both of her heads bowed gratefully. It wasn't hard to tell that this was their first time receiving food from others in a few days.

"Go home, now."

Chang ran his hand over her messy hair, sending them away from the bar.

"The rate of abnormal infants is over fifty percent now, thanks to Zhuo's Agent Orange and Chrystal Pea." The woman sent the girl away with her eyes. "However... if Zhuo hadn't used Agent Orange and fed the citizens with Chrystal Peas, I bet humanity would have been far worse now as less of us would've survived, resulting in a lower birthrate. Was he evil? Or did he consider the big picture instead?"

"Well, we can do nothing about it, right? Let's get them all out." Chang curved his mouth and patted some drunkard near him. "Bro, get up! You should go home now."

"What..." One of the listless mercenaries rubbed his eyes, slurring, "Right, home..."

"Pay your bills guys, pay your bills!"

The one-armed woman flicked the switches up, and the light became dazzlingly bright to the drunkards. She then grabbed the bills on the counter, going up to the tables one by one.

"You, three hundred and seventy State Yuan."

"You, seven hundred and forty State Yuan"

"..."

The one-armed woman collected money from one table and the other, urging most people out of the bar. Of course, she saved the most rejoiced group for the end.

"You guys..." The woman stood beside Chang and said to those mercenaries, "You, seven thousand and nine hundred State Yuan please."

"What the hell? Isn't that too expensive?" The price awakened the mercenaries from their drunkenness, and they yelled altogether, "Why?"

"First, each of our bills account for our own hydro bills, not only

is electricity pricey but the military had also order us to use it within a prescribed amount. Second, you all drank Baijiu, which is made from natural grain. Most of the others would choose Crystal Spirit that replaces natural grain with Chrystal Pea in the making process. Certainly, the price is different between these two. I think you know the price difference between Crystal Pea and natural grain. Natural grain is a rarity! I'm not asking for more than I should charge you," the woman explained. "On top of those, you are also compensating for the broken table. And hence, seven thousand and nine hundred State Yuan."

"But this is way too expensive! You're ripping us off!" the fatty Sanpang yelled out, standing up.

"By law, you'll pay for what you ate and drank, I think no one can deny that, can you?" The woman swung the empty bottles, saying, "In fact, I'm not ripping you off, you can ask for its price at other bars with this empty bottle. If I charge higher, you can come back to me and we'll talk about it. But today, I need seven thousand and nine hundred State Yuan paid."

The woman brandished her hooked arm as she became impatient. "Our margin for liquors is pretty low already, don't imagine that you can repudiate this bill."

"Repudiating? Your sh*tty bar simply didn't provide good service to us! There isn't even one stripper here! We don't care about money but we didn't enjoy our time here, and hence don't expect us to pay the full price! It was your bar's problem, not ours."

"Having strippers or not is our business, but you all have to pay

for the liquor that you all drank!"

"I only have one thousand, keep it or I'll take it back too."

Sanpang, who was speaking, fished out a wrinkled bill that was made of anti-corrosive synthetic fiber with Qing Shui's head portrait printed at the center. At the corner of this bill, an Arabic number was stamped - 1000.

"Asshole, so you decide not to pay don't you?" The woman was outraged by the mercenaries swollen with arrogance. She pushed Sanpang to the ground and pressed her iron hook against his neck artery. "No one is leaving without paying today!"

"Hahahaha, Seriously?" The mercenaries looked at each other, smirking at this curvy woman. They reached for their weapons. "What a pretty slut you are! Despite that you're handicapped, you're hot. Hey, come with us, we'll give you the money that you demanded."

"Zhizhi, your charm remains even though you're no longer that 26-year-old military officer." The man who had kept silence but just spoke out for Zhizhi was Chang. His face was expressionless, his laughter dull and dry. "It'll make you feel better if you take it as a compliment."

"Who the hell are you?"

The mercenaries had thought that Chang was one of the

bystanders at first, but they now saw that he knew the woman once he started talking.

In fact, the mercenaries felt strange when they started making trouble. The bartenders and waiters were not at all disturbed but indifferent to the din they made. They were either wiping the bar tables or mixing drinks as usual, as if they were unconcerned with the conflict in the bar.

"I am the owner of this bar, and she is a close friend of mine. If you guys are interested in her, you can totally come often and grab a drink here. However, we need to talk about the bill now." Chang maintained his straight face involuntarily. "Our bar sells drinks at reasonable prices, and to allow my customers to have fun at my bar, I only have one rule—anyone who provokes and participates in armed fights will be penalized with ten thousand State Yuan fine for causing inconvenience to others.

"Think twice before you act. As she has said, you must pay your bill today and I don't offer rooms for negotiation," the man clarified with a poker face, his finger pointing at a small blackboard hung by the door.

The handwriting on the blackboard was messy but readable - "Purchase on credit is not accepted in Chortle Bar, armed fights will be penalized with ten thousand State Yuan fine per person".

The mercenaries bursted into wild waves of laughter at those crooked characters on the blackboard. They pointed at the woman with hands pressing on their stomachs.

"Did you write this? Your handwriting is horrible!"

"You wouldn't write even that well if you had one finger missing." The woman flushed in embarrassment under their mocking. She stood straight and wanted to kick Sanpang's waist but another mercenary grabbed her ankle. Following the momentum, he masterly took out a pistol and pressed the muzzle at between her brows. "We won't pay for this bill, and what can you do about it?"

"Alright, ten thousand State Yuan per person for breaking the rule." Chang stepped forward, kicking the mercenary's chest from the side. As expected, the chest bone of this mercenary collapsed, and he fell to the floor.

Chang acted again before those mercenaries could react. He waved his hand among their waists, and their weapons were magically collected in his hand, balanced in his hand.

"Self-made weapons, poor power and accuracy; they aren't worth anything."

As he spoke, he shuffled the guns and left one in each hand; the gunfire was heard before the bullets were shot. Along with a flash, bullets grazed mercenaries' cheeks without actually hitting them. This intimidated them by the heat of friction without causing actual harm.

"Leave your valuables on the table, you heard what I said. Ten

thousand State Yuan per person for armed fights." Chang put on a lopsided smile. "The consequences won't be like now if you don't pay."

"..."

The mercenaries stood gazing at one another, as well as checking out the door for a chance of escape. But then they thought twice about it, remembering how they were disarmed. They touched the hot spots on their cheeks and made a wise decision to give in.

Men who suited their actions to the situation were wise. The mercenaries emptied their pockets.

There were guns, knives, money, daggers, and bug samples they had captured in the jungle today.

"You guys are destitute! Using all this inferior stuff, except for those bug samples, none of it is worth a penny. I can even get a brand new pistol at the black market for two thousand State Yuan." Chang laughed, banging on the table. "How dare you drink the most expensive liquors at my bar being like this? I'll take in all of these for thirty thousand State Yuan, and besides them, one of you must stay stay as a hostage. He'll be released when you pay me back."

Chang pulled up Sanpang, the chubbiest one off the floor, and expelled the rest from the bar.

Later, Chang's staff cleaned up the bar and greeted him before leaving.

The people remained in the bar.

"Name?"

Chang scanned the face of this remaining mercenary.

"Sanpang Mo," the person answered honestly.

"Are you sure this isn't your nickname?"

"No... this is my real name."

"Alright, Sanpang." Chang nodded, patting his shoulder. "Don't be afraid, do you know the reason why I'm keeping you?"

"I don't know." The man shook his head. "Wasn't it because of the debt we owe you?"

"That was one of the reasons. Besides that, I usually have a good impression of fatties like you. I used to have a good pal, we called him Pangzi." Chang lightly pressed the bone pendant under his shirt. "Unfortunately, I couldn't save him from his fate. Besides my personal reason, fatties are rarities these days, I was hoping to keep one as a souvenir. But I'm a man who keeps my own word, once your pals pay the ransom, I'll release you immediately. My

one last warning is - don't even think about escaping from me, the price for that is a hundred thousand State Yuan for every attempt."

Chapter 115: Jing After Four Years

Chang turned to the one-armed woman, saying, "Zhizhi, I'll leave him to you. Please make sure he doesn't escape from the bar. Today was a long day for both of us, so when you're done, you should get some rest. By the way, Jing didn't go out today, did she?"

"Nope, I locked her in her room," Zhizhi replied.

"Great..." Chang nodded. "Thinking about Jing four years ago, she was so cute and quiet back then. But when the puberty hit, she changed..."

Chang opened a door that lead to a suite, shaking his head. The layout of the bar was designed for both living and operating the business. He took out a chain of keys and picked one of them to unlock the room in front of him. The person who sat inside the room was a teen girl, her hair bleached to platinum blonde.

"I'm back," Chang said to the girl sitting on the bed cross-legged. Her fingers were busy with typing on the keyboard, the pale light reflecting on her pupils.

"I know. I knew you're back before you even came into the bar."

The girl glanced at Chang, rolling her round eyes.

"Can you dye your hair back to black tomorrow? And wear more

clothes, can you?" Chang stood in front of the girl, staring at her pink gauze dress. A stream of blue rose in his heart, his brows tying together. "You should wear decent clothes that suit your age. Can't you at least wear something casual at home? Or at least change into a pajama or something that covers your skin?"

"I don't care what you think, you aren't even my dad."

The girl kept tapping on the keyboard.

"I'm your brother!" The girl's attitude finally irritated Chang, but he took a deep breath instead, repressing the growing rage that swept across his mind. "Are you still mad at me interfering with your relationship?"

"Oh yeah!" The girl put aside the computer upon hearing Chang bringing up the topic. She changed her posture to lean on the bed's board more comfortably. "Who are you to interfere my life?"

"I'm your brother!" Chang exclaimed again. "And it doesn't really even matter who I am to interfere with your relationship. You just can't date that guy! He is merely a ruffian fooling around on the street. He's a human disaster that has been hurting girls over these blocks! If you were to find him again, I promise you, I'll shoot him in the face."

"Whatever, you can shoot as many people as you like. Do I look like I give a sh*t about it?"

The girl rolled her eyes again, pouring scorn on his threat.

"Then why are you dating him? Is there something wrong with your mind?" The rage was lit up completely with the girl's careless attitude. He pointed his finger at her. "Look at you! What have you become? With all this heavy make-up, what do you want with it? And your hair! You're the same as those hipsters back in 2000. Jing, what do you want? Can't you just be more mature after the bad days we'd gone through?"

"So, you like mature types?"

The girl leaned aside, making a seductive posture upon hearing Chang.

"Can you just listen to my words?" Chang pulled her ankle so that her posture was adjusted. "Jing, return to the normal you, please."

"I'm perfectly normal, the one who is strange is you. You can't even face your own feelings." Suddenly, the girl was peaved by Chang's request. She kicked at his stomach with great force, then stood up on the bed, overlooking Chang. "What has gone wrong with me? Why are you nagging about all this bullsh*t everyday after coming back? Do you even care about me?"

"Did I even ask you for anything? Why are you restricting me so much? Just tell me you're disgusted by me or something, what are you doing all this for? Are you trying to forsake me?" Jing curled her lips. "I think your life will be pretty much the same without me! Now that you've evolved even more, your nose is more

sensitive than Zhizhi's, and I just became useless since you're capable of resolving any kind of difficulties. I know that I'm no longer useful to you. You can say it if you want me to leave!"

"Go ahead!" Chang shouted. "Go ahead and live your own life then!"

"Right, right! Finally you say it!" The girl burst into tears when Chang yelled. "You really want to drive me out from here!"

"F*ck! We can't talk on this, we'll never come to an agreement." Her crying eased his anger, but he was even more troubled now. "Whatever, you can do whatever you want to. But I'm telling you, if you don't get back into normal clothes and remove all that make-up as well as agree to stop dating that guy, you won't get out of this room."

"I can be 'normal' in your sense, I can dump him as well. However," the girl spoke while sobbing, "you have to be normal as well. We'll share the same bed as how we always did back in the days, and you'll take me around wherever you go. Otherwise, don't expect me to change!"

"How can we... You're sixteen now! You're almost an adult, how can we share the same bed again?" His headache came with Jing's repeated request. "Have you seen any sixteen-year-old girl sharing s bed with her dad?"

"You aren't my dad, and I don't even know who my father is!"

"Indeed I'm not your dad, but I'm your brother! Alright, alright, I don't care about what you want to be but you won't leave this room tomorrow either."

Chang banged the door closed as he left, and immediately, a vase smashed on the other side.

The shattering sound caused Chang's headache to become more severe; his temples ached in a rhythm. He could do nothing for the situation, so he returned to his own room with a heavy sigh.

When he entered his own room, Zhizhi knocked on the door before coming in.

"What's wrong? You argued with Jing again?" she asked, sitting down next to him.

"Life is too peaceful for her now, and she is causing trouble to get my attention. Look at her makeup and everything, she isn't Jing anymore." Chang inhaled deeply to release the stress put on his mind. "She used to be a good sister to me, and she is a girl with strong mentality. What changed her?"

"I think she has her own desires." Zhizhi made a lopsided smile. "Did you not feel her affection to you?"

"I knew about it since a long time ago, and I do like her, in the way of a brother." Chang pressed on his temple, attempting to reduce the pain. "The most important thing is that, if I were to fall

in love with her, the relationship will constantly remind me of incest. And this notion keeps me away from her."

"Then why are you interfering with her relationships with other guys though? You should let her go."

Zhizhi laughed wholeheartedly.

"I'm just easily triggered when I see that guy; he's a pure ruffian. I'll be fine if she finds someone that treats her well, as long as the guy isn't a gangster... Ugh! I should stop talking about this, it's making me angrier." Chang picked up his gun on the table, saying, "I need some air."

"You aren't going to find that guy, are you?"

"We'll see."

Chang shut the door as he left. Zhizhi didn't stop him neither with action nor verbally. She smiled to his back and removed her jacket. She fell onto the soft bed, closing her eyes.

Chang wandered around on the street at midnight, aimlessly roaming among the buildings that were constructed in new era style.

Most of these buildings were reconstructed from the buildings from four years ago, but the appearance was greatly different. The architecture lost its vividness as they all were in different shades of

gray. All the cuboids in the city had some sort of add-ons on them, transforming establishments to what they called the post-apocalypticism style.

The city was free of wild plants but for fields saved for cultivation. The crops grown there were of all shapes and colors that hadn't been seen before the apocalypse. The residents in downtown areas even began to have nightlife since most of the threats—except for the sewage, which remained unexplored—were eliminated.

Four years ago, the purge of plants made urban greenery go extinct. Those insects and animals who lurked within lost their homes. To survive, they fled into the jungle for a new place to stay.

Now, humans had regained autonomy of this land.

After undergoing four years of development, the social structure had completely rebuilt as well.

The currency system survived but the currency itself had changed. Without economic, the society couldn't prosper. Bartering was strictly forbidden even though it was practiced for a few months, so money was still the value symbol for trade.

The political structure remained city-state, and the military was controlled by the reseach institute. The power was centralized in the institute instead of a formal government. And the person who played as a puppet on the surface was a man called "Hang Xie". He seemed to the head of the military.

However, what was disguised beneath was the fact that except for Hang, the other man who was on the top of the hierarchy, was the person who had his head portrait printed on the money bills - Qing Shui Li.

Drunk men and women were tottering and staggering home on the street of Zhengzhou state.

It seemed like drinking became the sole entertainment for everyone after the apocalypse—as long as they still had a few bills in their pockets, as long as they wouldn't starve.

In this new world, planning ahead was no longer a habit. Mortgage, education, marriage, all of them became less important. Living in the moment was the trend that everyone chased. After all, urban life and discipline was still not a solid guarantee for living through the apocalypse.

The pressure of surviving was the driving force for getting drunk. This way, those who survived opened their hearts to talk over their lost loved ones.

Chang was the same, he always talked about his parents and grandma when he was drunk.

Four years was neither long nor short, yet Qing Shui no longer sent him news about his family anymore. Those who passed away became history, and Chang lost a big part in his heart that took away his smile.

"Sweetheart, do you need some service?" While Chang was cherishing the memory of the deceased, a woman came up to him. "I'm only asking for 70 State Yuan, which is the price for one kilogram of Crystal Pea. How is it? It isn't expensive, right?"

"It's not, but I'm not in that mood." Chang edged away from the woman to keep on walking. But his shirt was pulled from behind. "Please, life is hard for as single women... If I can't earn anything today, I will run out of food tomorrow."

"Well then, would you mind having a talk with me while we walk?"

Chang took out a hundred State Yuan bill and handed it to the woman.

Chapter 116: Pangzi

"Sure!"

The woman swiftly took the bill, her spirit uplifted.

A woman and a man walked together shoulder by shoulder on a street lightly illuminated by the street light.

"You have something on your mind, don't you?" The woman took the initiative to start a conversation with Chang as she felt bad for taking the money but doing nothing. "Since you asked me to take a walk with you, do you want to talk?"

"Yeah, sure." Chang nodded. He noticed the appearance of the woman as he turned his head to her. She seemed to be in her thirties, neither magnificently beautiful nor ugly. Her eyes shined and she was curvy. She hadn't lost weight due to starvation. "Do you have kids?"

"I had one two years ago, but she passed away of sickness." The woman lowered her head when she talked about her child, but she quickly shook it off. "Do you have kids as well?"

"No, I don't. But I have a younger sister. She used to be a good kid but now that she's grown up, she became a rebel... Every day I go home, she would have a fight with me. She even deliberately dates a gangster to take revenge on me." Chang made a wry smile. "Every day she picks a quarrel with me, and if I let her out, she causes even more trouble. I know that I shouldn't lock her up every day,

but I get worried if she leaves me and lives independently. You know what it takes for a girl to live by herself."

"You seem prosperous."

The dangerous environment pressured the citizens into learning about weapons, even this woman could tell that the handgun that Chang used was one of the best in town.

"Not too bad. For the moment, I'm not worried about my own living. But I'm always on guard, as you know, these days mutations are common enough that perhaps one day humans will go extinct after being massacred by some other species. However, to be honest, my life isn't too bad right now."

"Well, the pressure comes in many forms, and since you've gotten over the pressure of mere survival, you have to deal with the pressure of living now. Humans always causes trouble for themselves." The woman smiled and the wrinkles around her eye deepened. "I don't think you need to worry too much. When the pressure of survival returns, your sister will be the same as before."

"Thanks, I think your words are worth a hundred State Yuan." Chang's rigid face muscles kept him from making an expression.

"Words worth money, that's what you rich people think of. To me, things that are worth a hundred State Yuan are only food." The woman's smile was miserable. "A woman like me gradually loses youth... I don't have any survival skills, either, not to mention hunting in the jungle to collect samples. Even the gangs

despise me. Since the military stopped distributing Crystal Pea seeds, it has become a market product. I have nothing, it's even a trouble for me to feed myself."

"I am sorry."

Chang closed his eyes.

"Well then, sweetheart, can you give me more then?"

The woman landed a hand on Chang's shoulder.

"It sounds like I should. "Chang took out another hundred for her. "This is the last time I would do something like this, I won't give more."

"I know where the line is." The woman's face showed the glaze of prudence. "Tell me more about your sister, I may help."

"I've been thinking about what can I do to handle her rebelliousness... Any ideas?"

"The main reason for her to do so is to get your attention. If you think you can't handle this anymore, then divert her attention," the woman said. "For example, get her a peer friend to hang out with... I think that's the best way of handling it."

"I see..."

The streetlights were turned off one by one as the night grew late. It was their first meeting, and they walked far down the district. Then they ended their conversation.

"Let's call it a day, I still have another thorny affair to deal with, so I'll be going this way, good night." They stopped in front of a tall building. "Thank you for the night."

"It was a pleasure hearing your story, and the money. I hope we can meet again."

The woman smiled briefly, turning away from Chang, and her figure slowly dissipated in the red fog.

Now, Chang faced the building. His sensitive nose informed him of the location of Jing's date. The scent that flooded the room hinted that the man had just had sex with a woman.

"Qing Shui told me that I shouldn't repress my feelings."

Chagn's anger built up rapidly. He prepared so that he could climb on the wall like a gecko. The micro bristles on his palms aided with his adherence to the wall, and he supported his lower body by having his feet push off the balcony. He sneaked into the house without making a noticeable sound.

The lock of the door was destroyed, and the man who had just fallen asleep was dragged out. Chang jumped off the balcony of the

second floor with the man's neck wrapped in his arm.

He dragged the man while sprinting to an area with no residents, after reaching which he threw the man into a dark corner.

"Mercy! I beg for your mercy!"

The man turned coward instantly as his opponent was fully armed while he was all naked. The man knew that Chang wasn't someone that he could provoke.

"Sh*t up, we've met once, do you remember?"

Chang looked down at the man.

"Have we?"

The man meticulously observed Chang's face, but the features didn't ring a bell.

"Am I this ordinary?"

Chang stomped on the man's face.

"No, no, no. You're not! It's my problem! I've bad memory..." The man's nose bridge was broken and blood flowed out from the nasal. "Please, mercy! I've really bad memory..."

"Your memory is none of my business. I came here to ask you for one thing, you're dating a teen girl, aren't you?"

"I am! I am dating some... Are you a relative?"

The red fog gave Chang's face a layer of mystery.

"I'm pretty sure my sibling is your date, how many are you dating at the same time?"

Chang was obviously provoked. He lost his mind over the answer. The man lost his front teeth under Chang's foot.

"Not... not too many," the man shouted out with a strange sound of air flowing through where his front teeth had been.

"Well then, you know about Jing Ji, don't you?"

"I do."

"Stop contacting her. If I find you're still dating her, I'll leave you alone in the jungle naked."

Chang lifted his foot from the man's face and walked away.

The man exhaled as the weight on his heart lifted, but Chang

came back to ease his own worries.

"Just to be safe..."

He did the same thing again but this time his foot kicked the man's genital area. The delicate sensation of the impact let him know that he had caused a severe injury. The man also shrieked out of unbearable pain at the same time.

"Now I'm assured..."

Suddenly, Chang felt lighthearted. He threw the displeasure of arguing with Jing behind him, returning home in a good mood.

The bell on the door rang when he pushed the door of the bar open. He returned to his own room and took a hot shower that was considered luxurious these days. When he came out of the bathroom, he noticed Zhizhi on his bed.

"I gotta talk to you about this, Zhizhi.... every single time!" Chang muttered to himself, lying on the left side of the bed. He was quickly dragged into dreams.

At midnight, Sanpang escaped from the bar, which Chang was aware of from the growing distance of Sanpang's smell, yet he did nothing but kept on sleeping. He tracked the mercenary down on the second morning in another block.

"A hundred thousand State Yuan."

The bar was closed during day time. Chang threw Sanpang in behind the bar counter.

"Bro, that's a hundred thousand! Even if I sell my own life to you, I'm not worth this much!" Sanpang started sobbing when he heard the cruel number. "We make our living in the jungle by collecting samples of new species, and we seldom have the luck of finding one and bringing it back safely. We earned much less than you imagine!"

"The time that we earned the most was about twenty thousand State Yuan for the sample, and we distributed that money evenly among us... We're basically exchanging those samples with our lives. I'm sure you know how dangerous the jungle is: the bugs, trees, animals, and I heard that there is a species called monkats, which know how to trap humans! Please, our lives are hard, and a hundred thousand State Yuan is simply too much..."

"Let's speak for real... If we weren't drunk that day, we would've never order Baijiu... We thought it was a nicer Crystal Pea spirit. We were really happy that day because of the sample, and we wanted to be unrestrained for once on alcohol, and I didn't know...."

Sanpang started to act out sobbing again, and Chang found it funny.

"Please... Those *ssholes don't have a hundred State Yuan at all, even if they had, they wouldn't pay them for my life..."

"Hahahaha, stop sobbing. You're making me laugh, and people say that I look weird when I'm laughing because I can't make proper expressions." Chang only opened his mouth but his lips did not curve up. "I see your situation. How about this? You work for me for three months and you're free of debt. This mission is to take care of my sister, prevent her from dating any suspicious men. I'll give you a good weapon but you have to promise me that you can ensure her safety."

As he spoke, Chang threw a well-made pistol to Sanpang from the drawer in the bar counter.

"And so are you, put away your dirty mind when you are accompanying her. If I learn that you've an evil plan, the consequence won't be nice." Chang pulled Sanpang up when the other had finished attaching the pistol to his belt. He lead Sanpang to Jing's room, knocking on the door. "Jing, I fond you a friend."

Chang took out a key to unlock the room, cueign Sanpang to come in front of him.

"See, doesn't he look like Pangzi?" Chang landed his arm on Sanpang's shoulder, and the latter showed a genial smile.

"Hey, Jing."

Jing's room was covered with glass pieces, and she sat on the floor, the only spot in the room free of glass. She was calm, gazing at Sanpang's round face. Her memory went back to four years ago

when Pangzi was still one of them. Unusually, she didn't start bickering with Chang and the stranger but waved to the latter politely.

"Hi."

Chapter 117: Qing Shui After Four Years

Chang was surprised by the expression on Jing's face.

"If I knew fatties were more fun and easier to interact with to you, I would have caught him earlier." Seeing that Jing didn't have any anger toward Sanpang, Chang was delighted. "From now on, I won't keep you in the room anymore. You can go out and have fun, but you have to bring Sanpang with you."

"Thanks, Chang."

Jing nodded as if the time had went back to four years ago when Pangzi was still alive. Her head turned between Sanpang and Chang, then she gave a toothy smile, seemingly returning to that harmless girl from four years ago, and lowered her head.

"Alright, alright." The burden in Chang's heart alleviated when he saw Jing's smile. He even squatted down to help tie her shoelaces. "Go, hang out! I heard that there is a supermarket that was newly opened, you guys should go there and check it out!"

"Chang, are you coming with us?" Jing turned with an expression of an earnest request. "Just like four years ago, we would go hunting and Pangzi would go searching for edible veggies. Then we would all come back together to share a pot of pungent soup... I felt really happy in those days."

Jing turned her smile at Chang, the scar on her face still glaring.

Jing's word reminded Chang of the old days. The day he had finished the college entrance exam, the day he had rescued Jing on the street, and the days they had all starved and gulped the pungent soup...

"I wish I could, but I have to meet someone from the military today..."

"Leave all the affairs to that science geek, I only want you to hang out with us for a day," Jing pleaded stubbornly.

"Alright, Jing. This time only, my schedule is reserved for you today." Chang messed her hair exactly the way he had done back in the days, the only difference being that her hair now was thicker and longer.

Even though Jing still looked a bit skinnier than her peers, the discrepancy was less apparent compared to back then.

"Just us three, I'm not allowing Zhizhi to come with us." Jing took Chang's hand, dragging him to the front. "She is seducing you every day, and I'm upset with her."

"Alright, alright, just us three."

Chang put his arm on Jing's shoulder as they walked out of the bar with Sanpang.

The red fog was as dense as in those times of their memories.

In the span of four years, the density of the mysterious fog wasn't reduced even a bit. No matter if it were rainy days or windy days, the fog remained. It was even found that the fog could dissolve into water perfectly.

Something unknown was driving the species on Earth to climb the evolution tree eternally.

The city was dilapidated.

Even after four years, most of the tumbled-down houses weren't recovered, and the roadbeds weren't fixed, either. Due to the scarcity of resources and the limited vision, transportation tools were abandoned except for some bikes scattered by the side of the street.

Most of the recovery of the infrastructure was suspended due to the insufficient resources.

After all, a city was like a factory, the supply chains had to be maintained for smooth operation. Without the accessibility to resources, the factory would have to face closure.

Without steel and oil, without other natural resources, the city was left empty beneath its shell.

However, given this harsh condition, human didn't give up but

thrived. Their lifestyle was half-modern and half-primitive.

The modern part was that the post-apocalyptic humans kept the habit of shopping in the supermarket.

The first thing inside it was the weapon counter.

The prices for weapons and ammunition were clearly labeled. The manufacturers came from individuals or the military, providing a full range of the product for the citizens.

Next to the weapon counter, there was the medicine one with an assortment of medicines placed neatly on the shelves. The supermarket also had armed soldiers stationed as safety guards, in the case of theft and robbery.

Medicine, weapons, and food.

They made up 80% of the products sold in the supermarket, for an obvious reason that they were the most needed goods in the city.

"Boring, boring! Let's go upstairs," Jing said with disappointment. "The military operated supermarket is insipid. The packing is just so poorly designed!"

"Well Jing, people are lacking resources, so who would care about the packaging?"

Chang laughed.

"That's how I got tricked! I remembered those expensive liquors back in the days, which all had nice packagings." Sanpang patted his head with nervousness. "Times have changed, I didn't know that the Baijiu we drank that had nothing on its clear bottle could cost this much. I should've asked first!"

"Oh come on, stop complaining for at least a day."

Chang shook his head, following Jing to the second floor.

The goods stored on the second floor were mostly hardtacks compressed with the latest techniques. From Crystal Pea biscuits to hardtacks that were made of other crops, the supermarket provided the widest selection in this community. The longest time things lasted could go up to half a month—these were all practical products.

Except for shelves of essential commodities, there was a shelf stocked with goods that were seen most commonly before the apocalypse; it was placed at a corner where less light got to it.

There were clothes, beddings, some toys, and even dolls.

"Who would have time to handsew this?" Sanpang picked up a handmade doll, but its face and body were absurdly squishy. "What is it?"

"It's a Jimi Worm! It's a harmless, photosynthetic species, perfectly safe as a toy material." The Jimi Worm wore a pink dress that appeared to be handsewn. Jing made a snatch for it from Sanpang's hands. "I want this!"

"No problem."

Chang nodded.

The dusk wasn't to be stopped as the clock tick-tocked away.

They spent quite some time in the supermarket to purchase food that could be stored for some time and items that Jing was excited about. Then, the three hung out in the streets here and there, allowing peace to fill their hearts.

At dawn, they returned back to prepare for the bar's opening at night, but a man in a white lab coat waited inside.

He turned as soon as he heard the noise that the door made. He smiled.

"Long time no see!"

"Wait..." Sanpang took a big leap to get in front of that person before Chang could even say anything. "You... you..." Sanpang rubbed his eyes to make sure he didn't mistake the identity of the

visitor. "Your head is printed on the money..."

"Nice meeting you, I'm Qing Shui Li." Qing Shui's smile was as benevolent as four years ago. Time seemed to have forgotten about his existence since he had no trace of aging. "You look like one of my old friends."

"Re... really?" Seeing the legend standing in front of him, Sanpang stuttered out of excitement. "You're really him? Qing Shui on the currency bills?"

"What is it? They've got impostors down here?" Qing Shui made a light joke.

"No... not at all. I'm just astonished. People say that you never step out of the lab zone and seldom make an appearance in the public. I believe I can count people who have seen you in person on my fingers..."

Chapter 118: Evil Moss

"What brings you here, sir?"

Sanpang hesitated to get closer to the legend. He seemed scared, and hence, a distance was always kept between them.

"I'm visiting my friends, and taking this opportunity to pass some information over." Qing Shui nodded to Sanpang, straightening his body from the bar stool. He made his way to Chang and Jing, said with a soft tone. "Hey Jing, you're getting taller."

"Thanks..."

Jing was reserved when seeing Qing Shui. She lost her liveliness every time she met him, hiding behind Chang's back as how she did when she was younger.

"You're still scared of me." Qing Shui didn't mind her attitude but started teasing. "What have I done? What scared you so much?"

"Perhaps she instinctively fears species with higher index," Chang said, stroking Jing's hair. "What brings you here today? You don't come down here normally."

"Nothing special happened, I just felt like seeing you." Qing Shui then turned to Jing, asking, "Tell me what number do you perceive me as if you think of me as a threat?"

"One?" Jing pondered, her eyes closed; she was perplexed. "How do you make it?"

"I can't tell you about this. The information comes with exchange, what do you think if you dye your hair back to black?" Qing Shui teased Jing intentionally. "Blonde doesn't suit you well, no wonder Chang seemed disappointed."

"Who cares."

"I'm not saying that you're causing trouble, but just don't forget that his tolerance has bottom line..." Qing Shui warned jokingly. He seemed to know intimidations best effect.

"I don't care!"

Jing stomped on the ground, her skin going down with goosebumps. She then turned around, running into her own room.

"Go check on her." Chang pushed Sanpang's back. "Please make sure she is safe."

"Got you." Sanpang glanced from Qing Shui to Chang. In his eyes, the two seemed to know each other well, but at the same time, he could sense the distance between them. It wasn't a good time to comment now.

Chang made a wry smile when Sanpang left the room. "Why are you winding her up? She is only sixteen years old, she wasn't

behaving rationally."

"I was teasing her. She is being ridiculous these days," Qing Shui said. "And you, why aren't you more patient with her? Now she can always do whatever she wants. You can leave her to me, I promise you that once she comes out from the institute again, she would be the Jing that you remember."

"Come on." Chang heaved a deep breath, then said reluctantly, "I trust you on everything except for taking care of kids. She wouldn't be such a rebel if you didn't take her away last time. She does everything intentionally to go against my will as revenge. Who knows what you did to her!"

"Chang, I did nothing bad to her but put her into a special training program so that she can grow stronger both physically and mentally. However, I've never expect such reverse reaction from her." Qing Shui looked into Chang's eyes. "If I were to say, it's your attitude that caused her current behavior. When I took her away, she was begging in tears for you to not let her go, but you did the opposite.

"I told you that I was going to take her to the institute for three months, and you didn't listen to me at all... Jing was stubborn and highly dependent on you, her separation anxiety was as intense as expected. What you've done during that time didn't help her overcome but strengthen the syndromes. For every few days, you went to the institute to make sure she was okay. But your kindness interrupted my plans.

"Every time she saw you, she cried; and it became worse when

you came more often.

"And that wasn't the worst part yet. In the end, you took her back before the three month agreement. It was your spoiling attitude towards her that made the current her of today."

Qing Shui's tone was full of pity.

"Well then what can I do now? This is the result that we got, and it was all my fault." Chang didn't argue back, as he knew that he wouldn't be able to make himself right.

"Then, let me take her to the institute for another three months? If you stop visiting her, I promise you I'll send her back with a stronger physique and mind."

"No." Chang shook his head. "Not in this way."

"Well, you have to deal with her yourself then." Qing Shui looked at Chang. "I can see that you'll be in trouble soon. She hates you when you send her away, and because she was an orphan, she developed strong dependence on you during the time we spent together. All the people around you, they can tell Jing's affection to you. The worst of all is that puberty hits at this time, so she will do anything as long as its against your will."

"Ah....It sounds like a dead end, there is nothing I can do, right?"

Qing Shui's words frightened Chang.

"There is one way out. She'll realized she was in the wrong if you're dead."

Qing Shui chuckled.

"Stop joking with me... Seriously, is there a way out?"

"Or, you accept her invitation. She would definitely be calmer."

While Qing Shui was speaking, he bursted into a series of wild laughter. It sounded weird.

Chang knew that Qing Shui's personality was always reserved and he was candid yet unruffled. However, every time when Chang met with Qing Shui, his change in personality made him feel absurdly uncomfortable.

"Aren't you affected by Zhuo too much? Why are you making jokes like this?"

Chang tried hard to frown.

"Zhuo? I think Zhuo was a great person to be friends with. He was forthright and daring. I don't see a lot of men living like him."

Their conversation stopped when Jing's door opened. It was Zhizhi who walked out from it.

"Mr. Li, " she said in a shaky voice.

If Qing Shui was disliked by Jing, then to Zhizhi, he was a deep-rooted fear in her soul. From her amputation and the time she was treated as an experiment subject, Qing Shui had become an instant trigger for her defense mechanism.

"Zhizhi."

Qing Shui's attitude was clearly different when Zhizhi faced him. His eyes grew cold, and he said nothing more than her name.

"Would you like a drink?"

Zhizhi tidied up the liquor bottles on the shelf before they ordered their drinks, then she poured a glass of spirits for each of them.

"Thank you." Qing Shui's index finger slid to the edge of the glass. He pointed at Zhizhi's hook on the stump, teasing. "Are you sure you don't want something that is more helpful?"

"Thank you for your kindness, Mr. Li. I'm afraid that I can't step into any lab again." Zhizhi smiled and glanced at Chang. "Enjoy your time."

"Thanks, Zhizhi." Chang took a sip of the spirit. He as well

glanced back at Zhizhi, but then a question rose. "Oh right, I forgot to ask you why you came down here today. We've been talking about Jing the whole time."

"Right, I was gonna show you this."

Qing Shui fished out a small bottle from his inner pocket which contained a strange plant with a moss-like appearance.

"What's this?" Chang supported his chin on the bar counter, observing the content.

"A kind of mutated plant, a true evil," Qing Shui said.

"We can see mutated plants everywhere, this must be something unusual."

It was clear to Chang that Qing Shui hadn't just come by to chat about some ordinary discovery.

"You are correct. The aftermath of using Agent Orange finally comes to us, thanks to Zhuo's devastation plan and his Crystal Pea." Qing Shui took out another bottle, saying, "This is the modified Agent Orange that he used four years ago. I'll show you the interaction between them."

The plug for the bottle that contained the plant was made of glass and the gap between the bottle was filled with rubber. Qing Shui unplugged the bottle and sprayed some Agent Orange into it.

Before the plant reacted, he secured the plug back in again.

As soon as the plug was tucked back, a high pitched shriek came from within the bottle.

The plant screamed.

Chang opened his eyes wide. The moss-like plant sprang up from the bottom like a fish in contact with sulphuric acid. It struggled, shrank, expanded, and screeched. It distorted into shapes just like a human suffering from torment. The screaming itself was bizarre enough to cause headache to Chang.

"Gross..." Chang rubbed his temples. "This is gross, it's evil."

"Exactly, this is what I thought too. And because of its characteristics, I named it Evil Moss. Not only does its vitality outperform that of any other species I met before, but also its reproduction ability is one of the best. One shocking fact is that it destroys."

Qing Shui kept shaking the bottle, and the Evil Moss tinkled in the bottle like a piece of metal ramming against glass.

"What do you mean it destroys?"

Chang stared at the Evil Moss in the bottle.

"You might not notice that this is a specially made container. If I were to use any ordinary sample bottles, it would've shattered already," Qing Shui said. "The moss is a parasite of the Crystal Pea. In theory, Zhuo's product should've been able to repel all parasites and pests by itself as it was carefully designed to do so. But this, it overcame the barriers that Zhuo set up for it. It sucked up the nutrient from the ground so that it is the only beast wherever they passed. I found it strange when I discovered it, and that's why I collected it.

"Let me put it into an example so it's easier for you to understand its nature. It's like HIV in the nature, it mutates rapidly to resist multiple defoliants. Whenever we use a new kind of defoliant, it always overcomes the drug's effect somehow. It was born to destroy."

"A species that is born to destroy?"

Chapter 119: Three Things To Say

"Exactly, a species that doesn't follow the law of nature. Tigers only kill for hunger, and I haven't seen a species that lives for destroying." Qing Shui raised the bottle. "However, it destroys, destruction is in its nature. It shouldn't have been born in the nature though, it's the product of gene alteration and a chemical weapon..."

"Is it this dreadful?"

Since the last time they met Willow, Qing Shui hadn't talked in such an intense tone.

"It is. If they were given a certain area to reproduce, they would grow exponentially. My estimation is that in 180 days, it would devastate everything except for itself on this planet. Wherever it invades, it will engulf the land, causing extinction of all organisms on land.

"In other words, it is a species that has the same effect as a meteorite shower to Earth, instead of causing the rise of temperature, it drains nutrients from the land. Eventually, Earth will be turned into a lifeless dessert as it will also die out once all the nutrients are gone.

"All the species dwindle in this disaster, humans will be no exception."

"What the hell..." Chang opened his mouth widely out of

astonishment. He felt shocked by the moss in the bottle. "So this is the end?"

While Zhizhi was wiping the bar counter, Qing Shui's word made her hand trembled.

"We could say that. Moss itself is the trailblazer of the nature; it can survive in different lands. The Evil Moss so far haven't met any natural enemies." Qing Shui put away the bottle in his pocket, then added, "Therefore, I wanted to forbid cultivation of Crystal Pea in Zhengzhou so that it's reproduction is constrained, and at the end, hopefully we can overwhelm this species."

"Does it really work?" Chang asked.

"It should work."

"But... If Crystal Pea is forbidden to cultivate, more than eighty percent of the civilians will start starving again. Starvation will drive them crazy, they will do anything for food." Chang leaned forward, staring at Qing Shui. "I can foresee that your decision will end up in an uproar, and the situation will only be worse than four years ago. Why? When the red fog arrived at that time, people considered that as a natural disaster which they had no control over; but this time is different, it is you who make them starve. They don't care about parasites, their desire is to feed their stomach. I don't think this can be settled down anymore once started, even it is you."

"I... I can't do anything about the riot but to have more military

patrolling. Don't worry, I'll make this work." Qing Shui let out a sigh. He was aware of the thorniness of this decision to be made. "I'll release more seeds of new kinds of crops soon, even though they are less productive than Crystal Pea, and they are more likely to mutate after a few cultivation periods, they will still be able to ease the public's stress."

Chang sighed.

"Of course, this is just the first thing I wanted to share with you."

Qing Shui's voice became lower and lower.

"And?"

"Two more things. And one is worse than the other." Qing Shui brushed his own hair with a hand. "First, do you remember the species that I found monitoring me at the Yessie battle?"

"A super life, right? What happened?" Chang asked. "Does it have offspring now?"

"I think so. In four years, it disappeared for two years and three of them surfaced recently."

"Really?" Chang touched his own forehead. "Then it should be a species that domineers over humans. Not only is it intelligent, it is also capable of cloaking and reproduction..."

"Therefore, they aren't allowed to exist on this planet." Qing Shui supported his head with a palm, the elbow laid on the counter. "I need to wipe them out before the species grows big. I am not saying that you are in charge of a mission but I just need you to keep an eye on it when you go to the jungle.

"The third thing I wanted to tell you is about the Willow. I just got news about it." Qing Shui's face slightly distorted for the first time as fear slowly slid in to his mind. His pupils contracted. "It is in the city of Wuhan now. I heard that the city was razed to the ground when it arrived. But a source told me that the city was fraught with silence. It does the old trick again, massacring humans and crushing their scalps; it robbed brains and made them its own while draining blood and flesh from the corpses as its nutrient source. It seems like it finally owns an ego and wisdom. It knows how to plunder knowledge and intelligence, limitlessly."

"A real doomsday..." Chang closed his eyes.

The flashback scenario resurfaced of the Willow twigs raining on the land, the hopeless human... The Willow rooted deeply, its roots flourishing under ground as its branches above the horizon. From there, it would reach out to the whole world eventually.

"How did you get your information?" Zhizhi interrupted. At this moment, she forgot about her hatred and fear of Qing Shui.

"We worked hard to get the communications back in these years. We set up a communication frequency but it only works during the

rainy days, when the concentration of the red fog is the least dense. This information came when it rained a few days ago." Qing Shui exhaled. "Wuhan is a willow city now."

"Are we able to hinder the Willow?" Chang asked.

"I don't think so."

"What about nuclear weapons?"

"That doesn't work either." Qing Shui smiled wryly. "Don't forget about this fact - the Willow's intelligence comes from humans. It owns more than a million brains now, so it must know what devastation can be caused. If it dares to show itself, it means that it isn't afraid of anything anymore. Let's step back - he may have nuclear weapon launch codes already in one of the brains he robbed."

"Well, I suggest that when the day comes, we commit suicide together, this just isn't something that we signed up for." Chang lowered his head, joking. "Let's live the rest of our life happily and not think about this."

"Don't give up yet. It's in Wuhan at this moment, where it will settle down for a while before coming north again." Qing Shui smiled. "And remember that those humans only lost their bodies but not their brains, they may still exist in it, and they are still alive in another form."

"Stop, please. It really scares me." Chang checked the time of the day, halting Qing Shui's explanation, "It's getting dark. Let's get more drinks, the whole bar is reserved for us tonight. It's a celebration for us, for still being alive now."

"Sure, but I think we should open the bar. We really need some good vibe tonight." Qing Shui stood up. "We'll grab a table over there."

"Alright." Chang stood up as well, accompanying Qing Shui to the table. "Zhizhi, thanks for bartending tonight in advance, we'll be over there," Chang said, pointing at the table mentioned by his friend.

"And Jing, as well as that fatty, we should invite them too." Qing Shui added.

"Sure! I'll get them."

Chang laughed wholeheartedly. Soon, he came out with Jing, who was still pouting. Sanpang followed behind them.

"Just enjoy tonight, alright?" Chang clammed Jing's waving arm under his. "For one day, can we stop the fighting?" Chang raised Jing's head, looking into her eyes from below. "I promise, I'll never send you away again."

Chapter 120: Chasing The Super Life

They all got a hangover.

The next morning, Chang sat up from the bed with his head throbbing. As usual, Zhizhi stayed in his room. He took the clothes hooked behind the door and changed into them.

"Are you heading out?"

"Yeah."

"Is it dangerous?"

"I'm not sure, we'll see."

He took his crossbow as well as his handguns, zipped up his jacket, and secured his dagger in its sheath. He was all set to go.

"I think we should close the bar for two days, and don't forget to lock the door," he said to Zhizhi. "He's going to make his decision public today, so be ready for the riot that goes around. Don't forget to take care of yourselves."

"I won't be back for at least three days. Mr. Li will send soldiers to be stationed beside the bar to ensure your safety. As long as you stay indoors, you guys will be safe," Chang said while checking bullets for his two handguns.

The Shark was an upgraded Pfeifer Zeliska with larger bullet capacity. Compared to the old one that he had used, the power of this was shockingly destructive.

The handgun sacrificed its accuracy to improve its capacity and destructive power. Even if it was used to fight against the gene-altered soldiers, the power would be great enough to punch holes in them at close distance. However, beyond the fifty meters range, the aim became unpredictable; more precisely speaking, the Shark wasn't design for shooting over thirty meters —this was due to its pursuit for destructive power.

Though, long range shooting wasn't essential to Chang. Because the furthest he could see was thirty meters—past that distance, the sniping crossbow always performed better.

Chang doubled-checked his equipment in the room, then left the bar, waving to Zhizhi before he turned his head.

His mission today was to investigate the habitat of those unknown super lifes. Before Qing Shui got too drunk yesterday, he left a piece of cloth with a special scent to Chang. Needless to say, Qing Shui's intention was clear.

Of course, Chang still had a choice of not executing the mission. Though as Qing Shui had said, the threats were coming closer, and all of these seemed to be interrelated with them in innumerable ways. He couldn't run away from or pretend to not know them. Chang thought, as long as he could help, he would try to make

things better in his own way.

Chang sniffed the cloth diligently, then gradually paced towards the source of it.

The pedestrians on the street were still innocent of the incoming disaster. They thought that they could thrive through the days in the red fog, but the striking fact of the end of their peaceful lives was ahead of them in the most cruel way.

In comparison to the first apocalypse, the second appeared to be more brutal. None of the citizens were prepared for the sudden change of the air, but the second time would be the coming of the super lives' attack. Humanity seemed to be so fragile in front of threats that exceeded them in power.

Humanity had grown to be more prosperous, but all these treasure of knowledge and wisdom were taken by the Willow in the blink of an eye compared to the human history.

At the edge of the jungle, Chang glanced towards the south, where Wuhan was. A Willow with millions of brains grew there; he couldn't imagine what the city had become.

He sighed and then entered the whimsical jungle.

Under the daylight, the jungle was dumped into profusion.

The sun shredded its beams through the branches, the shadow

mottled on the ground. The jungle changed its colors through evolution and mutation, and trees grew into shapes that endeavored for more warmth and light. Plants were no longer dressed in the plain looking greens. Fungi reached out their volva in damp shadings. Some plants shifted uncomfortably when Chang screened the sunlight on them.

The fern on the ground shook their arms around, constantly seeking for a more suitable living environment.

The vibrant jungle was splendid yet beset with crisis. Here was just the bottom of the ocean, the difference of a coral reef could hardly be told from a red octopus.

Trotting through the jungle consumed a lot of energy for Chang as he needed to pay full attention to every detail around him. Even though his olfactory ability surpassed Zhizhi's to a point that his was comparable to a rat's. He was able to tell apart the dangers lurking within the jungle, but mutation often brought out new species that he had never met before, so Chang could never be sure even of his own safety.

Chang took off the sniping crossbow from his shoulder. In this jungle, the loud noise of a gunshot would be a tempting lure to hunters, so he decided to investigate with the crossbow.

His goal today was to locate the habitat of the super life, so that he could lessen Qing Shui's burden. If Qing Shui needed to search for the super life, at least he would have a rough estimation of their hiding spot. Yet the jungle played naughtily by messing with Chang's nose. The trace of that special scent lingered in the air yet

was almost impossible to find.

He explored the area, heedfully and without hurry, as he walked through this flirtatious jungle.

Under the guidance of the scent, Chang entered from the north entrance of the jungle. It was the same route that they had taken in the Yessie battle. The scene was familiar but much had changed here. The journey deepened the hard frown on Chang's face.

A warning sign was waiting ahead of him, yet he had to trespass into the forbidden zone.

It was a region fraught with toxicants.

Four years ago, when Qing Shui detonated the hypermutable bacteria bomb beside the Yellow River, the bacteria suffused the region, bringing an end to the species residing within. The bacteria even traveled beyond the battle zone. It almost infected the whole area that was occluded by the jungle.

Although Qing Shui's squad sterilized the whole battle zone afterwards, the hypermutable bacteria was almost impossible to completely disinfect. Not only did the remainders reproduce, but also their resistance aided them in surviving by infecting other species.

Those infected species suffered from the torment of infection, but if they lived through the period, they would have an exclusive

spot to occupy in the jungle.

Thus, after four years, the infected zone was more deadly and poisonous than any other in the jungle. Species in this zone were not only able to produce antibodies to resist the hypermutable bacteria, but also carried the bacteria themselves. More than that, they used the bacteria as a defensive weapon .

When the news reached Qing Shui's ears, he was greatly impressed by the imagination of the nature. At the same time, he ordered a prohibition to this zone.

"This is tricky..."

As Chang looked around, he realized the the colors around had become monotone. The branches of the trees grinned at him, and the footprints of animals and insects were less frequently seen. It worried him.

"Humans are the masters of destruction but nature is the master of creation..."

Chang looked back to the fantastic world behind him, then turned to the greyness in front of him. He decided to stop here.

"It's too dangerous, even it's me, I may get infected somehow," Chang murmured to himself. At the same time, a branch with a slim lump burst apart, and a shower of black juices splashed toward him.

"What!"

Chang dodged out of instinct, but the black juices were forced out from the lump and ejected intentionally toward Chang. He jumped back for a step but that wasn't out of the splash zone. The juice rain was a concentrated stream, so he was able to avoid most of it.

However, what made the situation worse were the simultaneous bursts of other lumps, as if the trees were conscious of an invader. The black juices came as multiple streams of spray toward his location.

Dodging wasn't the ultimate solution in this situation as more and more lumps were triggered.

On Chang's camouflage uniform, there were two drops of black juice sprinkled and stained. Soon, the acidic juice corroded through the cloth layer, while a stinky smell of rotten eggs came forth from the spots.

Chang swiftly removed the jacket and threw it in to the air as a lure. He sprang away from the besieged circle, returning to the fanatically vivid world.

It was life threatening here.

To mark the spot, Chang peed on a tree before leaving the place—a place he shouldn't intrude by himself.

This was a place unintentionally and artificially made, which wasn't at a danger level that he could handle with ease.

He veered, thinking that he should report this to Qing Shui immediately.

At the moment he was turning to leave, a strange scent reached his nose. It was extremely familiar to Chang—the scent of the target! However, the scent seemed to come from the other direction instead of the poisonous zone.

However, Chang didn't want to take the initiative to chase after it. Whatever that super life so named by Qing Shui was, it was not something that he could compete with. He came here to confirm its location and the scent assured his doubts. He was delighted as he moved at a steady pace.

Unexpectedly, the scent smelled like it was approaching Chang. It came a few times faster than him—it must've been attracted by his pee mark.

Perhaps, perhaps that organism was searching for humans too.

Thinking of this, Chang sprinted away without hesitation, keeping to his highest speed. He even utilized his navigation skills to map out a route that was the most difficult to go through. However, his efforts seemed useless as that organism caught up with him after one hundred meters.

Chang was sure that he couldn't run away from the pursuer. Instead of endeavoring to flee from it, he sprang up and clawed with his hands at a tree, coordinating his movements so he moved like a gecko. Once he reached a branch, his hands instantly operated the sniping crossbow and he aimed it at the source of the scent—a fishy smell.

The trigger was pulled and the bolt shot off from the trigger mechanism. It tore layers of leaves, finding its way to the target.

"Ah!"

The bolt was nowhere to be seen but the voice came from a place beyond his vision; the scream sounded like a human's.

Chapter 121: Perfection

The reason why Chang thought that the organism was human-like was because the shriek didn't sound like rustling or squeaking, but a syllable that a human would emit.

"Ah!"

Though a slight difference in the pitch sounded strange. The pitch was unusually high, as if it was born with a vocal sac on the neck.

And when the shriek came from the red fog, the organism got enraged. The assumption of emotion change was because Chang smelled that the scent came closer and closer.

The scent sprang up as if running up, dashing towards Chang. He noticed a swirl formed in the red fog due to its great speed. That swirl pressed toward him, wildly and gustily.

Chang didn't have time to think and just switched his weapon to the Shark and the handgun. The target was still nowhere to be seen, so he fired toward the growing swirl three times.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

A long flame tail stretched out from the muzzle, sending the bullets to the fog. This time though, there wasn't any scream that could cheer him up, neither was there a deep sound of flesh

splashing.

Chang knew that he had missed the shot.

Later, a voice came from behind the layers of leaves, a voice that sounded strange but had a steady tone and was filled with curiosity. It was speaking decent Mandarin. "You can't see me, can you?"

"Wait... what?" Chang widened his eyes. "You can speak our language?"

"Of course! Dad teaches us about humans, and he even kidnapped a few human teachers for us. How can I not know how to speak?" The voice came from the tree crown, sharp but juvenile. "Though I'm not as old as you, but daddy told us that we are much smarter than you, learning your language is just a piece of cake."

Chang didn't wait for the creature to finish his words. He fired in accordance to the source of the voice and scent. Though he missed the shot again.

"How dare you!" The sharp voice penetrated through the layers of leaves again. "This is what you human calls despicable! Right! I'm gonna kill you!"

When the voice dropped, Chang felt that he had lost his ability of locating the other with the scent suddenly. His nose could no longer detect that fishy smell, only the freshness scent of the

jungle.

"Surprise! Dad told me that humans are pose no threat if they can't smell or hear," that unnamed creature said with disdain. Then, sounds and scents associated with that voice disappeared completely.

The swirl was gone as well. It seemed like it had left.

"Here I am!" the voice burst out of a sudden. It was from behind Chang's back.

A forceful strike came from behind Chang and he collided with a thick tree trunk that was more than fifty meters away. The pain on his back was burning.

The creature disdained and shouted out, "This is how fragile you are, human! Your species only existed for over ten thousand years and those who ruled for more than a million years even went extinctict under the force of nature. Arrogant, how arrogant you humans are!"

"Is that how you think of us?" Chang crawled up from the ground. He kept talking, "Even if we're arrogant as you said, the world still belongs to us, doesn't it?"

"I know you're tricking me, you meant to locate me with my voice, right?"

Out of a sudden, the voice came out from all directions. The source became ambiguous instead of one. Chang widened his mouth in astonishment as he hadn't expected that its camouflage system had evolved to such an extent.

Sweat wet the handguns in his hands.

"Unfortunately you're too clumsy in this. What on earth are you thinking by trying to trick me?"

The voice approached again for it increased its volume. But the directionless sound confused Chang's locating ability.

"I hate humans. When I read about your history, it only told me that wherever you humans step your feet, there must be destruction or extinction.

"A species like humans shouldn't exist at all. Your desire for materials and power seems endless. Daddy also mentioned to us that humans are fratricidal, how inferior is that..."

The voice came closer and closer. Chang's perception melted into nothingness. Perhaps his enemy was venting out its anger, perhaps it was merely teasing him. But none of it did he care about. He was only seeking a way to flee, to survive.

So he chose to close his eyes and refrain from smelling. When the voice came close enough, he emitted a very distinctive call.

The sound could not be heard. It was more of a hypersonic wave that collides with the surrounding objects and can retrieve the information ahead of him. The returning echoes gave feedback to his brain upon what it hid up ahead.

Then, the image of the creature was clear. He mapped out the figure by echolocation—it was about two meters in height.

Instantly, the outline of the creature rendered and Chang held up his handgun in its direction.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM...

He fired off all of his ammunition because he knew that his enemy wouldn't give another such golden chance to him.

Instantly, a mix of sweet and bloody scent fused in the air, and a deep sound of a bullet tearing flesh was heard.

"I got it!"

Chang was delighted for a second but his ecstasy soon diminished when his handguns were shaken off from his hands. When he regained his mind, he realized that he was being stepped on with a big foot.

"Despicable, despicable, despicable human!"

The light seemed to twist when the creature swirled in the fog. Something with an appearance that he had never seen before was looking down at Chang.

From what he could see at the closest distance were toes that gripped his chest—three rounded toes, flawlessly pale but with sharp toe nails growing on them like knives. The morphology of them resembled frog feet but above them were thighs similar to a human's. The body shape was similar to a human's but the difference was that it had a stout tail.

The first thought that sprouted in Chang's mind was that the monster was a beautiful creature; not ascetically but sophisticatedly. The portion of strength and beauty was truly - well mixed. The streamline muscle could make people associate it with leopard and its bone structure seemed to be born with perfection.

Though this beautiful creature was bleeding, its eyes flamed with anger.

Chapter 122: Admiration

"Die under my stomp!" the creature yelled.

There were two bloody holes on its shoulder. Though the blood made it seem like the injuries were severe, they weren't fatal. The foot on Chang's chest slowly pressed him into the ground like a mountain squashing every bit of strength out of him. He couldn't move just lay under the creature's control.

The gap between their physical strengths was extremely wide.

What's more, Chang was disarmed completely; if he were to force a hand-to-hand fight, he doubted that he could hurt it even a bit.

That's why he was certain that this was his last day alive.

"I said, die under my stomp!"

The creature stretched its leg further. Chang's chest was at the edge of collapsing and his face distorted from torment.

"Ah!"

The last breath was forced out of his lungs. His chest bone crackled as if a firework blooming.

"It hurts, right?"

The creature tilted its head, making a lopsided smile.

"Cut... the crap," Chang squeezed out the words through his lips.

"Wait... I changed my mind. Killing you on the spot is boring, I'll torture you to death." The creature drew back its leg and picked all the weapons for itself. "Without these weapons, you're just a bug to me."

The creature tidied up the weapons, then it curiously opened Chang's backpack.

"What is in there?"

It stirred the backpack.

"Some food and water, as well as medications."

Chang slowly sat up from the ground, rubbing his chest bone.

"Food? Is it delicious?"

The creature looked back at Chang, its eyes shining.

"Nothing special, some hardtacks." The innocence of the creature intrigued Chang. He couldn't help but ask, "How old are you?"

"I just had my first birthday a few months ago." The creature continued on browsing through the backpack until its fingers gripped a piece of hardtack. It clumsily opened the packaging, then pushed the food towards Chang. "You take a bite first. Daddy told me that humans are all insidious. I need you to test if you've poisoned it."

"Okay..."

Chang bit the hardtack from its hand while thinking about some other things.

Judging from its age, he assumed that the creature was in its early childhood and has lived in the jungle for almost its whole life. Though it was extremely intelligent, it still lacked social experience and seemed to be curious about everything. A beam of hope ignited when he realized that the creature might be less brutal due to having high intelligence.

"Hey, what's your name?" Chang asked searchingly while the creature was busy gnawing at the hardtack.

"Liu Xin, Liu means flow, and Xin means heart. My dad named me," the creature slurred. "This is dry, I like fish better."

"Do you have fish for your daily meal?"

Chang's eyes lingered on the webbed feet while he intentionally

continued the conversation.

"We do." Liu Xin dragged Chang up by his collar upon finishing enjoying the hardtack. "Don't try to dig things out from me. You hurt me today really bad. I'll take revenge on you but I haven't thought of a way yet so I'm thinking of handing you to daddy."

"Is there room for negotiation between us?" Chang quickly asked, going into a slight panic when he heard that Liu Xin planned to transfer him to his father. He was almost sure that the chance of escaping from that experienced creature may be non-existent. The mature one must have an abundance of social interactions, and it had even avoided Qing Shui multiple times.

Taking into consideration that Liu Xin was still an amateur and lacked experience when interacting with humans, he was innocent enough to be tricked. But if Chang was to be brought back to its habitat, he would definitely be caged somehow. Thinking of this, he urged Liu Xin, "Hey buddy, we are both intelligent species, we could just have a talk about this. Though I hurt you but those wounds don't seem fatal. Besides, you hurt me as well, it's fair game, you know?"

"It doesn't count this way." Liu Xin shook his patterned head. "If I were to use human language to describe you, you are my captive. You aren't allowed for negotiate at all."

"If you let me go, I'll bring you yummy food," Chang suggested, making a last struggle.

"Although I'm still a kid, you won't fool me like that." Liu Xin chuckled. His wet and cold fingers gripped Chang's collar again and he started walking into the jungle. "I don't care about what you say, I'll let daddy make the judgment."

Liu Xin steadily walking on. He bypassed the poisonous region and soon made it to the Yellow River shore. From what Chang observed, Liu Xin was more than three times faster than he was and its endurance was exceptional as his pace was kept constant. Even though he was running fast, his wound didn't lacerate and bleed again. He was simply superior to any of the humans Chang knew.

On this short trip, Chang struggled, joked, teased, and hoodwinked, but none of it worked. Liu Xin only chuckled at his attempts and said nothing about them.

A natural habitat for mutated amphibian creatures was where the flow of the Yellow River was the slowest.

There was a place beside the river where competition was the fiercest for that place was the most prosperous. Liu Xin's kind was apparently the most noble out of all the species near the river.

Some of the creatures were drinking, some of them were resting. None violated others' territory recklessly. It was clear that this place had achieved an equilibrium in power.

Perhaps Chang was the first person to discover these monsters that lived underwater.

In this special habitat, there were pythons coated in thickened and colored scales; frogs that had their moist and green skin but were now walking with straightened legs; fish which had grown into the appearance of salamanders; as well as species that looked exactly like water plants... This was a heaven that celebrated differences and uniqueness but was dangerous at the same time.

The different species were either resting or lurking for prey. Some were drinking at the waterside but their strained back leg muscles betrayed their nervousness. Liu Xin and his family had to be the top predator as all the other animals spread out to form a circle as fast as a drop of ink dripping into water when he approached.

Liu Xin threw Chang on the beach at the river shore, then shouted at a gigantic sand hole. "Papa, papa, I captured a human, but he is strange, he is capable of a lot of things..."

In seconds, from that three meter wide sand hole, a head sprouted out. The head was a perfect sphere shape, its skin the same as Liu Xin's and the pattern laid over like a well crafted artifact. What came after the head was the body. Its structure was also similar to Liu Xin's but this creature was more muscular. His height was about five meters and his physique stretched out more. Instead of being pale, his skin had a metallic reflection, and his stout tail fell on the ground when he moved out from the sand hole.

Chang felt a pressure coming from the creature that made him

feel as if his heart was about to stop beating. The feeling was much more intense compared to when he had met Zhuo.

"Human?"

The amphibians who were resting on the beach all fled like frightened rabbits. They fought on who'll escape first to the Yellow River and soon the turbulent waves swallowed them. The creature's appearance cleared the lively habitat in a few seconds.

"Gak...."

Chang swallowed unintentionally when he saw this gigantic creature.

"Your smell is familiar..." The titanic creature moved slowly to Chang. He seemed confused after staring at Chang for a moment. Then, he lowered his nose to the top of Chang's head, twitching. "You were in the research institute," the creature said, still sniffing, "am I correct?"

"I did," Chang answered with a nod. "I used to live around there."

"Oh... I think I know who you are. Four years ago, you came with Qing Shui to the poison zone and somehow killed that other scientist." The creature seemed delighted when he talked about this. "I remember you guys were talking a lot, so you're probably a friend of his."

"Yes." Chang nodded, he didn't deny the fact.

The reason why Chang was temporarily submitting to him was that he could only survive if he was valuable to the creature, since the creature was an intelligent species.

"That's great! Mr. Qing Shui Li is someone that I admire."

The creature helped Chang up upon hearing his answer which overwhelmed him by how unexpected this favor was, yet he felt strangely uncomfortable.

The greatest absurdity was the fact that the creature was huge in size without high degree of similarity to human yet was able to speak human language and make human gestures. This surreal experience dizzied Chang and he felt as if he was teleported to an alien planet.

"Do you find me strange?" The creature was smart, he read Chang's thought just by looking at him. "But you don't need to be afraid, we Amphibia are a friendly species."

"Amphibia?"

Chang was perplexed.

"That how I named myself as a species. I'm the first of our kind, and naming is quite important." The gigantic creature's pale face seemed kind. "I mutated from a frog, but I also evolved some

features from other species, so Amphibia sounds like a nice name for summarizing what I am."

The creature spoke with his back bent but felt that he was impolite somehow. He then swept his tail away and sat down. But even sitting, he was still much taller than Chang.

"I see..." Chang didn't feel that the creature would do any harm to him and loosened up a bit.

"So, you were there four years ago?"

"I was, I was there all the time," the amphibia said. "Initially I was attracted by a strange sonar wave, but then the Yessie came.

"Back then, I was still naive about humans and the world as I had just gained intelligence about that time." The Amphibia's mouth curved upwards when he recalled past events. "I even attempted to communicate with the Yessie, but it responded to nothing. And soon, human scouts came..."

Chapter 123: Amphibia's Conspiracy

"The human scouts came in three waves, and the size of each new troop was greater than the previous ones. I stalked one of them and that was the first time I came in contact with the human world...

"I was able to render myself unseen to a naked eye and wandered into the city. No one discovered my presence and I learned a lot during that time. Then, when I came back here, the battle had already started and that clumsy Yessie was slaughtered by human hands. In the end, I only saw a man squeezing another's neck...

"I was afraid to remove my camouflage, afraid to be killed. And so I learned a lot about humans, about your strategies. I even tailed Qing Shui to the research institute and discovered that he was a great person of this era. Without him, I wouldn't have my offspring."

Though the creature was polite and sincere, Chang never loosened his guard. After all, the creature must have certain prejudices and defensiveness against humans.

Chang learned that from how Liu Xin treated him.

He had never met a human before and his values were instilled to him by the creature. From how Liu Xin treated Chang initially, he didn't think the creature was as friendly as he displayed.

"I'll show you my place." The creature stood up as he calmed

Chang. "It was designed and built in accordance to human aesthetic approach and amphibia habitat. Come with me please."

The creature waved his tail, facing Chang with his back, then walked back to the sand hole. Liu Xin followed after when the two of them entered.

Chang knew well his own situation. He was sandwiched between two amphibias which made sneaking away from them simply an impossible task.

The creature turned his head to Chang upon coming next to the hole, nodded and jumped into it. Chang wasn't sure if he would be hurt from jumping into this seemingly deep hole but he had no choice so he followed suit.

He landed on a soft pile of sand and what was ahead of him was a castle. The whole room was spacious with traces of digging and flattening evident all around the place.

The creature even pressed a button on the wall and the space lit up.

"How did you get the electricity to here?" Chang almost shouted out in astonishment.

"Electro-techniques aren't hard and I stole all these devices and cables from humans." The creature smiled. "You don't mind this, do you?"

"Not at all, humans can't use them anyways. But where does the electricity come from?" Chang continued asking.

"I also stole a small power generator on my way, it runs on gas." The creature laughed. "Don't ask about the gasoline, I stole it too."

"Alright, no more questions."

Chang chuckled while nodding.

"Papa, he hurt me." Liu Xin starting howling to get justice for his injuries. "Since he is acquainted with Qing Shui, you should make him a hostage and exchange for the thing you want from Qing Shui..."

"Stop!" the creature yelled at Liu Xin when he interrupted their conversation.

The creature's voice was deep and sandy yet sonorous. It wasn't hard to guess that his vital capacity and cardiopulmonary function were at their peak.

The small amphibia pursed his lips; he was too startled to speak more.

Chang did the same thing—he stayed quiet.

The creature led him around the whole castle, showing it off. There were human captives, equipment that were built by the creature, and he even had his own lab.

The last place the amphibia led Chang to was his own room in which four of his kids were playing around. The creature asked them to leave the room in a soft voice and then asked Chang to sit down.

"Mr. Liu, you came for me today, didn't you?"

The creature poured Chang a cup of tea, or more precisely—a bucket of tea. The creature sat back on his heels and tail and straightened his back for the formal conversation.

"After all, the poison zone at the north of the city seldom has visitors. And I just happen to notice you have my scent on you. I think Qing Shui handed you something of mine, "

"You aren't wrong." Chang nodded. "He asked me to find you, he seemed to be interested in you."

"Hahahaha! Mr. Li has been interested in me for a long time. I saw his traps in the city and jungle but just didn't approach them at all." The amphibia laughed, nodding. "We're smart from our birth. I think our intelligence is close to a human with Encephalon Mutation. Mr. Li has underestimated me.

"He really is taking a big step here. I wonder for his motivation of

sending you here, he must have thought of the possibility of you being captured."

"Don't try to sow dissension in our relationship."

Chang's heart almost froze for a heartbeat.

"Of course I won't, I'm just telling you the truth." The amphibia picked up his cup, taking another sip. "He knows my abilities and he knows about my habitat. It isn't surprising then that you were likely to be discovered by me, because I am better than you in all aspect. So I discovered your presence long before you found a trace of me.

"And you... How can you slip away from my fingers? Though you are probably one of the strongest humans, compared to me..."

The amphibia stopped .

"I know how this will go, I can't fight you nor your son."

"Well, it was your bad luck to meet him today, I've been busy the whole day, it was my negligence." The amphibia's mouth curved upwards. "Though it's the same result."

"Well... According to you, Qing Shui sent me here to you, what does he want from me then? To kill me? He could have done it himself by flipping his palm, he doesn't need to plan out all this. "

"I see, you've got me wrong on this, son. Mr. Li knew that I wouldn't kill you even if you were captured." The amphibia put down his cup. "I think he must have known what I'm thinking, adding to it the fact that I've met you four years ago, he had confidence in sending you here without losing your life."

"Then, what was his purpose? Tell me."

"For this conversation that we are having now. As you see, even though I can reproduce asexually now, I can't grow my species fast." The amphibia frowned. "I thirst for a rapid reproduction ability, and Mr. Li can lend me his hand."

"And human, I bet you guys encountered some unsolvable problems. Thus, he might need my help as well," the amphibia analyzed. "His purpose is simple and obvious—he wanted to meet me, someday. And you are the perfect chip that he gifted to me."

Chapter 124: Ozean

"The charm of being intelligent..." Chang burst into a series of laughter. "You made a good use of our language."

"You didn't believe in me."

The amphibia stared at Chang's face.

"I didn't mean that." Chang squeezed out a smile. "Your assertion almost caught me, but what do you want from me? The whole purpose behind this conversation was to sow discord between Qing Shui and me, so by the time you can talk to him in person, you'll be able to take control of the conversation. That's your intention, isn't it?"

"You aren't wrong." The amphibia didn't deny his intention.

"What do you want exactly?" Chang asked.

"Reproduction ability," the amphibia answered, grinning.

"I thought you're capable of that already. Look at your kid Liu Xin, he looks all healthy and energetic." Chang didn't let go of his curiosity. "Although you're all alone now, I believe your offspring will grow as time passes by. Why would you want to risk yourself to get in touch with Qing Shui?"

"Those kids you saw are merely a secondary me. They were split copies of me." The amphibia couldn't help but sigh. "I'm the only one of my kind who is capable in splitting, and I spent a long time to push myself to evolve in that way."

"Wait, what? You can evolve along with your own will?" Chang was shocked by the news. "That means you can evolve according to your needs?"

"Correct." The amphibia nodded. "In fact, everybody is capable of that, it's just the fact that you guys are much slower. The process of evolution will take dozens of generations, and I happen to be capable of accelerating that."

"That isn't as easy as how you talk about it. Four years, you only took four years to achieve what you want the most." Chang laughed wholeheartedly at the amphibia's humbleness.

"As you said, this isn't a slow process. But that doesn't help in solving the most urgent problem." The amphibia was deeply worried. "If I die, that will be the end of my species."

"Then what kind of help you're looking for?" Chang asked. "You think Qing Shui can help you solve the reproduction problem?"

"Oh yes! He's an expert in genetic research, and I've heard about the Modifier he made. To tell you the truth, I'm somewhat interested in that little vial." The smile on the amphibia soon faded. "We're in the same boat as humans, the Modifier sheds light into my predicament."

"I understand," Chang said, agreeing.

"Let me tell you this straight, I need that Modifier to add on top of my rapid evolving ability. I believe my next copy will be a reproducible individual." Hope flashed on the amphibia's face. "What do you think? Will you bring this message to Qing Shui?"

"Sure, why not?" Chang nodded decisively.

"Though, just to be safe, I'll send someone else to him first. The person will be informing Qing Shui about your visit. What do you think?" The amphibia leaked a slight grin on his face. "We'll see his reaction first, and then we'll determine if you're a qualified chip."

"I don't see any sincerity in you for doing this."

Chang was disappointed, he shook his head in remorse.

"Well, I'm a cautious being," the amphibia argued. "Mr. Liu, be welcome in my humble home. I'll make sure the message is delivered to Qing Shui in person."

"While you're staying here, you're free to go around my castle, but stay within a kilometer of it. Exceeding this limit is prohibited and there will be strict punishment for it."

"Oh wow, I guess thank you?" Chang inhaled, lifted the bucket-

like teacup from the table, and gulped a mouthful of tea. "If there is nothing else to talk about, I'm really interested in going to the river shore. There must be some interesting organisms that reside under the turbid river."

"Sure, feel free to go, please. I suggest you bring Liu Xin with you, though. The shore is dangerous and sometimes I myself can't directly confront the behemoths." The amphibia stood up with a humble gesture. "Mr. Liu, I hope you don't take what happened today seriously. I yearn to establish a good relationship between humans and myself and hope you don't treat me as an enemy of your kind."

"Don't worry, I'm mostly happy about my upcoming stay in your place, with sufficient food supply and everything, perhaps it's better to live here than my own house in the city."

Chang smiled reluctantly as if he was self-comforting. He walked out from the spacious living room, then went up toward the outside world.

The sand castle was too humid, and he felt like he was suffocating when inside. Perhaps the amiphibia preferred a damp living environment, but as a pure human, Chang didn't want to stay an extra second in this kind of humidity.

He made his way to the shore and sat down on the wet sand with his legs crossed. The Yellow River roared, galloped, and ignored Chang's frustration. His heavy sigh was inundated by the great symphony composed by the Yellow River.

Liu Xin followed Chang, first looking out from the sand hole and then quietly approaching him.

"Hey." He lightly kicked Chang's arm with his three-toed foot.

"What?" Chang glanced at him. "Go away! I'm not in a mood for talking."

"What brings you the bad mood?" Liu Xin asked, sitting down.

"I'm a captive now, and obviously that's the reason why I'm not happy." Chang turned his head away to see Liu Xin. He stood up and dusted off the sand off his pants. He slowly walked toward the riverside. "Don't talk to me."

"Hey! It's dangerous at the riverside!" Liu Xin shouted. He knew what was lurking under the water, deliberately waiting by the shore to attack the animals who came to drink from the river.

"Go away."

Chang was irritated, and then a horror welcomed him to the shore—there was a giant splash and something pounced on him. His instinctive reaction pulled him back and saved him from a huge mouth that had emerged from the water and bit down where he'd been standing just moments ago.

Two rows of sharp teeth firmly clenched. The crystalline sound hinted of strong biting force. Saliva burst out from the teeth gap and showered Chang.

To propel himself from the monster, he placed one of his booted feet against the teeth so that he was able to make a backflip to jump away from it.

The huge head retracted. The roaring waves concealed the terror, and the river looked as if nothing had happened.

"It seems like those who live in the Yellow River generally have a superior body size compared to the land animals."

The monster that had just attempted to swallow him had a head that was as big as Chang's whole body. Its neck was elongated, resembling a snake. The indistinct shadow below the water hinted that its torso was titanic .

"Oh yeah. A lot of these beings used to live in the ocean, but they were out-competed and so they migrated to the river. We call them Ozean, and it isn't a surprise that they're so large considering their origin."

Chapter 125: The Earth

"So they were eliminated from the ocean?" Chang squinted at the shadow. "This thing isn't weak at all!"

"Of course it isn't weak. Even I can't subdue it easily." Liu Xin laughed. "But oceans take up a lot of space on this planet, so it isn't a surprise that some monsters existed prior to the apocalypse. They simply just got stronger and bigger."

"How is it possible that they were just driven out like that? Are they really at the bottom level of the hierarchy in the ocean?"

"I would say they probably aren't at the bottom but the middle range. It's easier to survive in fresh water than in the ocean. One thing for sure, though, is that they are definitely not the superior ones," the juvenile amphibia asserted. "The top predator won't easily migrate from their habitat since the their place supplies them with an abundance of food."

"I see how this works. Can you do me a favor, please? I need my handguns, I don't feel safe here. Without my weapons, any wild animals are potential threats to my fragile life," Chang said. "You have to guarantee the safety of your hostage, don't you?"

"Oh, safety shouldn't be something you need to worry about when you're with me. No one can hurt you. Plus, my dad is always around, you can shout his name when you feel unsafe." Liu Xin wasn't swayed.

"Alright... I forgot to ask just now, what is your father's name?" Chang asked, changing to a new topic.

"Liu. It means flow. He only uses one character for his own name." Liu Xin said. "He said that he is the ancestor to all amphibians, and hence he only named himself with a single character. It is his surname and first name. And we, as his copies, inherited his surname."

"Seems Mr. Liu is highly aware of the importance of building a family tree for his species."

"Of course. In the forthcoming thousand years when amphibians establish its civilization, my father will become a figure like Adam or Eve to mankind. We are far more intelligent and physically more capable than humans, how could that not happen?" Liu Xin's face softened. "Compared to humans, we're more superior as a species. The fittest survive, amphibians should rule the world."

"So far the humanity's advantage is the accumulation of knowledge and wisdom. But those are what we can study and learn. As long as we develop a population base, eliminating humans will be as easy as flipping my palm."

"Ambitious." Chang was unperturbed. "So you're almost two years old, how much time did you need to grow as mature as your father?"

"I don't know. Four or five years, perhaps. There is also the possibility that I will never be as strong as him. Papa is allocating

all his abilities toward evolving reproduction. If he gains the reproduction ability in the future, I think he'll be improved in every aspect. Reproduction is all he cares about now, by solving this problem, he'll have time to evolve in other aspects."

"I see. Hey, have you ever dived down in the river?" Chang pointed at the Yellow River.

"Of course, that's part of my everyday routine," Lin Xin replied.

"Can you show me what's underneath the water?"

"Are you thinking about diving?"

"I am." Chang didn't hide his intention. "Will diving worsen your injuries?"

"Not a big deal. Unlike to humans, water won't cause infection to our wounds as we grew up in it," Liu Xin said. "What about you? I thought humans can't breathe underwater. You are the most important chip to papa, you can't die."

"I can hold my breath for quite some time." Chang grinned.

"Okay... then sure, I'll need to stay close to you when we are under the water for your own safety." The amphibia's last word was lost as he jumped into the river. The current was swift but that didn't discourage Chang. He followed suit, swimming toward the center.

"Now, let's dive." Few meters away, Liu Xin was floating in the river.

"Okay."

Chang took and a deep breath, diving into the water. He opened his eyes wide, and for the first time, the world underwater removed its camouflage.

The water condition of the Yellow River had been greatly improved, it was less muddy and clearer since the apocalypse. The main reason for the improvement was due to the reclaiming of the upstream forest; soil erosion was significantly reduced when the roots solidified the land. That's why when the source of soil and sand to the Yellow River was cut down, the river gradually unclouded. The water could have been even more clear if silt hadn't accumulated in the river bed over time.

Chang was astonished by the scenery under the water.

The red fog was lightly dissolved in the river and tinted the water a pale red. His vision became clearer compared to when he was at the shore.

He could now see as far as seventy meters, and he quickly lost count of the variety of aquatic animals and water plants that entered his vision.

"I didn't know that crabs are this big already." Chang gesticulated to Liu Xin to show his amazement, but the latter apparently didn't understand his gesture.

Liu Xin thought Chang wanted that crab for a meal, so he accelerated toward the gigantic creature.

Liu Xin was even faster here than when he was on the land. The stout tail helped his balance and the webbing between his toes provided enough surface to allow better acceleration. He weaved his whole torso along with the muscular legs, and the motion brought him forward. He was like an arrow leaving its bow.

The amphibia landed on the crab's shell and ripped its claws off before the crab could catch him. He then punched through the great shell to paralyze it.

Liu Xin returned to Chang with this crab the size of a human.

Liu Xin wasn't able to speak in the human language under the water either, he could only gesture, cueing that the crab was tasty by pointing at the crab and his own mouth.

"Shall we try it at the shore?" Chang gestured out his invitation too, then the two swam upward.

"If I was given proper weapons and there were two of me, I probably could kill you on land." Water dripped from Chang's clothes, initially streaming, then slowing down to drops. "But upon

witnessing you hunting underwater, I don't think I could ever be your opponent even if there were tens of me.

"Didn't you encounter a great resistance underwater?" Chang asked. "I noticed that you were just as fast and flexible underwater as on land."

"You see, my skin is extremely smooth and moist, my muscular composition and bone structures are also different from human. We aren't bad even compared to fish." Liu Xin dragged up the crab shell. "This thing tastes really good and it's one of my favorites. I know you can beat me for sure if I was to confront you in bare hands.

"In fact..."—Liu Xin stared at Chang—"although I'm not human, I still know how to use weapons."

Liu Xin raised his hand while he spoke. It looked pretty much like a frog's hand, but the webs between the fingers started to shrink then wrapped itself around them as Liu Xin waved the fingers.

"My fingers are agiler than yours." Liu Xin wiggled his fingers as if he was playing piano. "Papa stole weapons from your kind, and we remade them to fit our hands."

"..." Chang nodded to those long, thin fingers. He quickly lost himself in his thoughts.

Previously, he had known that Liu Xin was an intelligent species,

but he had never considered that any other species other than humans could use firearms as well.

It wasn't because he was naive, just that he never allowed himself to think about it, or he didn't dare to think of it. Four years ago, the gene-altered soldier had traumatized him, and now the amphibia would soon become his worst nightmare if they turned their backs on humans.

In terms of speed, even juveniles like Liu Xin were much faster than the gene-altered soldiers.

In terms of force and strength, Liu Xin alone must be at least ten times stronger than the gene-altered soldiers.

In terms of toughness, Liu Xin had been hit straight on, but it hadn't left much impact even though the bullet was from the modified handgun.

Given these observations, the amphibia was a species that the gene-altered soldiers couldn't be compared to.

Plus, this species was more intelligent than humans, and they could use weapons.

Four years ago, the gene-altered soldiers could only understand the simplest commands, and they didn't even know how to use a weapon. Thanks to that, Chang had been able to survive through his predicament.

Today, the chance of overcoming the threat from amphibia was nearly non-existent.

Besides the things mentioned, the amphibias also had sensitive perception and vision; Chang hadn't realized how negligible humans were until he met Liu Xin, even though the other was still a kid.

Four years, it had only been four years. A species that surpassed humans was born on this planet, except for the fact that it couldn't reproduce itself rapidly. Chang was saddened, he felt depressed for the future of the humanity. At the same time, another great species popped in his mind.

"Do you think amphibia is the most powerful species on earth?" he asked.

"That's for certain. Humans used to rule the world, and whoever rules the world is the best species alive. But we are more outstanding than humans in many aspects, so naturally, we are the most powerful species."

"Then, do you know about the Willow?"

"I don't. What willow?" the amphibia inquired with interest.

"A willow tree that is much bigger than the whole city of Zhengzhou. To it, destroying a city is as easy as blinking eyes. It

gathered millions of human brains and utilizes their power for itself," Chang explained to Liu Xin. "You acquire knowledge through studying books, but still I don't think you guys are as smart as Qing Shui. However, the way the Willow acquires knowledge is a completely different story. It robs brains and keeps them hidden on its branches. It's like a computer, its power increases when it has more boards and chips."

"Really?" the amphibia exclaimed.

"I think it's actually more capable than I describe. Qing Shui told me that the Willow has taken a permanent residence in the city of Wuhan, and it seems like it's planning to expand from Wuhan to the whole Earth."

Chapter 126: Utopia

"Oh come on, this can't be true." Liu Xin's pale mouth curved into a frown; it was obvious that he didn't believe Chang.

"It's as mighty as I have just described to you." Chang laughed. "It's okay that you don't believe me, but I did warn you about its existence. When it decides to come back to Zhengzhou, don't blame me that I didn't tell you in advance."

"Stop talking nonsense, Chang. You would have died by my hand before, since I run so much faster than you."

"Hmm, you aren't wrong." Chang was left speechless for a second. "Never mind, let's eat the crab first."

"Wait, let me ask the chef out." Liu Xin's smile was full of childish delight when food was mentioned. He bounced into the sand hole and soon returned while holding on the collar of a middle-aged man as well as a big pot.

"He is one of the chefs that Papa brought here. He knows his stuff well, I love his dishes." Liu Xin placed the pot and the chef on the ground, grinning. "His name is [Haiyong Li](#), you can tell he was born by the water from his name, which I adore."

Hai means ocean, yong means brave and courage

"Hi, I am Chang Liu, just another captive here." Chang smiled to the other human.

"Haiyong Li, I am just a chef that cooks."

The middle-aged man smiled wryly. He then dug out a dry hole to set up firewood for the pot, which was too huge for his size. The chef returned to the sand hole for cookware, and he filled the pot with water before attempting to make a fire.

The chef did everything in a routine-like procedure, and Chang wasn't entertained, so he pulled Liu Xin's hand to take him down to the water again.

He was intrigued by the organisms that he saw in the river and wanted to take a closer look at what those behemoths and fish had evolved into. The reason behind it was that it might help him deduct the ecology of this area.

The river was lightly tinted a pale red. Chang followed after Liu Xin, then soon tilted his head to look up ahead.

He saw clearer under the water, and in most cases the depth of the Yellow River didn't reach seventy meters. Though it got dimmer when going deeper. When Chang was one meter below the water, he could see as far as seventy meters before himself, but when he stepped on the river bed, he was buried in edgeless darkness.

The water grass swayed around him, but there was nothing he could do down there.

Without a source of light, the organisms who resided on the river bed had evolved to eyeless animals. Chang tried imagining what would the ecology be in the ocean.

He held his breath firmly as he hadn't gained gills due to evolution. He saved up energy by constraining himself from any vigorous movement. He browsed around instead, and got trapped by a strand of water grass in a few steps.

The water grass was tenacious. Chang wasn't able to break it without putting in a good effort. The ripped water grass feebly flew about when he walked away from it.

Liu Xin followed after Chang at all time.

Liu Xin and Chang developed some sort of tacit understanding along the way. While they were exploring the river bed, Liu Xin would point out dangerous objects that he recognized. One of them looked like a rock but turned out to be a mutated turtle with perfect disguise; one had saturated skin color, which was both their lure and a warning sign for predators; some fish seemed harmless and as ordinary as grass carps, but when Chang grabbed one for a closer observation, the fish curved its lips to reveal two layers of spiky teeth.

Liu Xin waved his hand to Chang in a hurry when he noticed what Chang was clutching in his hand out of curiosity.

Because the communication between them was voiceless, Chang didn't get his message immediately. The same moment, the

ordinary looking scales on the carp straightened and countless barbs poked out from beneath them. The carp changed into a sea urchin like object, and the barbs penetrated through Chang's palms.

PUFF!

It seemed like the barbs weren't meant to be a weapon but a defense mechanism as they retracted immediately.

Chang lost hold of his breath from the sharp pain. A stream of bubbles escaped from his mouth, and as a result, he felt the desire for oxygen growing stronger exponentially. He waved his hands and legs so that he could reach the water surface as soon as possible.

The blood on his palms spread out instantly from his struggles, and the water was dyed bloody-red.

"Ah!" Chang slowed down once he rose above the water and took a deep breath. He raised his hand in front of his face. "Holy sh*t, what is that fish! It's despicable!"

"We nicknamed them Spookies, they're extremely hard to deal with and they just love to call out to their friends. I'm not scared of them at all, but it's better that you go ashore since the blood will attract their attention for sure. Let's get your hands wrapped first." The blood was filtered through Liu Xin's gills when he passed by that area. "When the Spookies come, they'll gnaw you, flesh and bones."

"They sound like piranhas." Chang laughed. "Except the fact that they're more intimidating 'cause they equipped themselves with all those barbs."

"Well, seldom organisms are willing to bother them." Liu Xin smiled. "Even if it's me, if there is a big flock of them, I would choose to avoid instead of encountering them directly. Their bites are surely too weak to injure me, and they are slow, too, but it's always unpleasant to see this kind of fish around. They are just annoying."

The two went ashore and laid down flat on the beach for a brief rest.

"You are living a quality life in the jungle."

"That's because we are strong enough for this terrible yet brilliant era. The red fog, it brought us a second Cambrian period, and we were given a chance to better adapt the nature." Liu Xin raised his head, staring the sky.

"I am sick of this era, it took away my family, and almost all my friends. They died because everything changed in one night, and no one protected them."

"I am standing on the opposite side from you. I love this era, it gave me my family, and everything I have now," Liu Xin said.

"I miss my old life."

"That's because you had too much."

"I miss the old city."

"Those metal structures aren't worthy to be remembered with fondness."

"Have you ever had a mother?"

"Never."

"I see."

...

A human and an amphibia were surprisingly having a good time chatting on the beach. From what they loved for food to the excretory structure of amphibia; they explored their physiology to the extent that Chang got to know if amphibia needed to consume water and the lack of genital organs. Chang pulled off a hair of his for Liu Xin, and in return, Liu Xiu let Chang touch his smooth skin.

Their conversation lasted for a long time, and they didn't stop even when the crab was served.

At the very end --

"Do you think that humans and amphibians have any chance of communicating and working together in any way?" Chang asked.

"Only on the level of individuals, such as you and me." Liu Xin took a few seconds to ponder. "Papa told us that a human and an amphibian can be friends. However, humans and amphibians as species can never be friends.

"The reason is simple, humans aren't valuable for us to exploit. If our population grows to a reasonable base, I don't see humans having any competitive advantages in this survival game. Elimination is just a matter of time, right? This is a competition between two species, neither of us will allow the other to survive as the other will eventually become an irremovable threat."

"Makes sense." Chang slurped a mouthful of crab roe, then he turned to Haiyong Li with appreciation. "Hey, bro! Your cooking skills are superb!"

"I don't consider myself the best, but I am not bad either." Haiyong was busy eating the crab as well.

"Do you have any relatives?" Chang shouted to Haiyong, who was sitting a distance away from Liu Xin.

"Not at all, they're all dead. I was living in the countryside, and I bet you know what those places have become. Except for a few

villages that were fortunate enough to avoid the inroads of plant mutation due to the landforms, the rest were drowned in plants. I was lucky enough to run away from there." Haiyong avoided eye contact with Chang. "I don't have a purpose for lingering in this world anymore. They kept me alive, and I thought, so be it."

"You're living a relatively peaceful life here, which isn't bad."

"It isn't bad, at least I don't need to worry about food and shelter. To be honest, the amphibians aren't terrible, even the big guy is kind."

"True, I can tell." Chang nodded.

"Humans would never bear the existence of another species that is intelligent." Haiyong heaved a sigh. "In this world, every individual has their own thoughts, and thoughts bring divergence. I figure, if everybody held same thoughts, then we wouldn't have disagreements..."

"What you think of is an ideal world," the amphibia interrupted. "I remember I saw a word, utopia, right? That's exactly what you're talking about, and that's unachievable."

"It isn't impossible." Chang burst out laughing. "Remember the Willow that I told you about?"

"It..." Liu Xin sunk into rumination for exactly five minutes; he didn't stuff the crab meat in his mouth until it got cold. "Utopia

sounds like an ideal place, but it isn't that good as it sounds like..."

"Yes, you wouldn't be having this delicious crab meat, nor could you have kidnapped me in a utopia. As for me, I couldn't flirt with girls anymore, nor would I have the freedom to do whatever I want," Chang said. "That's why I think that differences are great."

"Haha..."

The amphibia chuckled, then continued stuffing the crab meat in his mouth.

The two hung around the beach after dinner until the sky got dark.

Chang was to stay in Liu Xin's room tonight; the bed was huge enough for both of them, and they laid down comfortably, yet he couldn't fall asleep whatsoever. First, the sandcastle was extremely humid, and he felt sticky all night. Second, the body temperature of Liu Xin was about ten-degrees in Celsius lower than a human's. And third, Liu Xin was a bad sleeper. He could only sleep on the side as he had a long tail; when he made a turn, the tail always slapped Chang's stomach.

Therefore, on the morning of the next day, Chang complained, "I'm done sharing the same bed with you! I didn't get to sleep last night at all!"

"Why?"

"Nothing important, I'm just missing my girl." Chang didn't want to elaborate, so he made up an excuse on the spot.

Chang had learned that there was no concept of sex or gender among amphibians. Since they couldn't reproduce sexually, they had absolutely zero interest in talking about sexual desires. Whenever Chang brought up the topic, Liu Xin was reluctant to get involved in the conversation.

Chapter 127: The Crowd

As expected, Liu Xin withdrew from the conversation when Chang said that.

At the same time, the door of the room was opened and a muscular figure walked in - Liu.

"I am glad to see you're already awake, Chang." A set of toiletries lay in Liu's giant palm. "No one has used this set before, please make yourself comfortable. By the way, I also bring news.

"I sent a human to Qing Shui already, I hope he'll bring back good news this afternoon."

"Oh really?" Chang nodded. "I do hope it's going to be good news."

"Mr. Liu, it'll never be bad news. I won't hurt you no matter how Qing Shui responds. After all, I don't want to take the risk of bringing discord between me and him.

"Since Qing Shui sent you to me for an honest negotiation, I can't turn down his favor." Liu stood at the center of the room, explaining his plan whose intention was yet to be seen. "Though, I consider this to be a friendly communication regardless how important you are to Qing Shui and whether he is willing to help me break through the reproduction problem."

"I hope that's really how it is." Chang looked away.

Sorrow hit him and he didn't even say bye when Liu left the room.

Chang curled up on the bed and didn't speak until afternoon.

3:20 P.M

A juvenile amphibia holding a man by his shirt's collar was running out from the jungle.

Liu and Chang awaited his arrival outside of the sand hole.

The amphibia didn't have a chance to speak for Liu instantly asked him in a strict tone, "You weren't followed, were you?"

"No, I was waiting at the edge of the jungle all time, when he returned from the institute, I carried him back by his shirt, running back in full speed." Amphibias didn't sweat as they didn't have sweat glands distributed on their skin, instead, a special fluid secreted on their tongue, indicating that they were fatigued.

The little amphibia breathed heavily, then he spat a bit of dark green saliva to the ground, saying, "I don't think any human has a more sensitive nose than me, nor is my match speed wise. Hence, there shouldn't be anyone that could've followed me."

"Great." Liu heaved a sigh of relief, nodding. He then asked the human on the ground. "Did you deliver my message? What did Mr. Li say?"

"I recited everything you told me word for word." The human raised his head, proud. "There were three messages in total. 'I have Chang as my guest.', 'I need reproduction ability.' 'I have no intention of causing harm but seeking cooperation.' These are exactly what you told me last night."

"Great, I am glad to see that you didn't run away."

"I can't... my wife and kids are with you, I can't risk running away." The human almost choked. "Are they okay?"

"Of course they are okay, there is no point for me to do anything to them if you didn't run away." Liu stated, then asked again, "So how did Mr. Li respond to my suggestion?"

"He only said six words." The human felt pressured when Liu asked the question with his face approaching his, he swallowed to disguise his anxiety.

"Tell me, what did he say?" Suddenly, Liu had a bad feeling. He comforted the timid human. "Hey, don't be scared, I won't blame you for anything you say."

"He said..." The human swallowed again. "'Release him, or you'll die.'"

"Trust me, please. He said nothing but this. He sent me away with his soldiers afterward," the human explained all in a fluster. "It wasn't because I didn't want to negotiate with him, either. Mr. Li didn't even spare time for me to negotiate with what you taught me to tell, he literally kicked me out from the institute..."

"Hmmm... Release him or I'll die?" The amphibia drew his attention to Chang, the color of his pupils changing. "It seems like you are quite important to him."

"I told you, we are friends." Chang shrugged. "If you really want anything from him, threatening him with me isn't a good way to go, he won't play your game."

"I knew it." Liu's eyes didn't leave Chang. "That's why I treated you as a friend since the very beginning. Mr. Liu, you are free to leave now."

"Leave? Are you sure?" Chang's eyes went wide; Liu's decision was out of his expectations.

Such decision shocked everyone present, including the little amphibias around Liu. The pupils of their eyes enlarged. "Why? Papa? Why would you do this? Wouldn't it be nice to just keep him since he is so important? We should always have a backup plan, even if we aren't using him for anything, what if he is actually a critical person to our future?"

The little amphibia who brought back the human shouted out,

"Papa? Why are you afraid of Qing Shui Li anyways? We don't need to be scared of him at all! Please give me a gun, and I'll shoot him from afar if it's as dangerous around him as you said."

"But who will solve our problem if Qing Shui is dead?" Liu frowned. "Plus, it's impossible to kill Mr. Li even if I gave you a bag full of guns. Stop the nonsense, kids. Please send Chang back home."

Liu's frown deepened.

"I am not going! Why do we have to compromise with a human? Why don't we just steal all his stuff from the lab and figure something out? I don't see the point..." The little amphibia was interrupted as Liu grabbed him by the torso.

"Please, no more talking." Liu gazed at the little amphibia's pale face.

"..." The little amphibia held his temper back, though he still felt it was unfair.

Chang was picked up by Liu when he put down his kid. A sandy voice sneaked into Chang's right ear when he was laid down on Liu's shoulder. "Let's take you back home."

In a flash, Liu accelerated without running. Chang's opened mouth filled with a squall of wind, and under the inertia, the acceleration pressed Chang's body against Liu's shoulder. The very

real fear of falling off forced Chang to hug Liu's neck in a tight hold.

It was hard to describe how fast Liu was. Even if Chang had turned his head backwards, he felt that the wind was trying to tear down his body, and opening his eyes widely was simply impossible.

The sensation was exactly the same as when you put your head out of the window of a car speeding over 120 km/h. The speed was startling and visually stunning.

"What speed this is!" Chang tried to speak, but since he turned his head to Liu's ear, the wind again flushed in his mouth, causing his sentence to be spoken intermittently.

"Thanks." Liu grinned, accelerating again. The distance between the shore of the Yellow River and the edge of the jungle seemed strangely short now.

"Thank you for releasing me." Chang was gently put down from Liu's shoulder; his eyes narrowed when he smiled to Liu. "I should get going if there is nothing more that I can help with."

"I hope you can talk to Qing Shui for me sometime in the future." Liu didn't leave immediately. "This is my way of showing sincerity, I hope he can give me a chance."

"We'll see how that goes." Chang strode away from Liu, immersing himself in the human world.

The giant figure gradually became smaller and smaller, until it became a tiny dot, and Chang found himself walking on a concrete pathway again.

Only one day had passed, but the city was out of shape already.

Chaos!

The only word to describe what was happening on the street was chaos. Chang hadn't seen such crowd-filled streets since a long time ago. Civilians, who were robbing, and military, that was attempting to maintain order, flooded the streets. Dead bodies could be seen everywhere, as well as bloodstained, ripped shirts, torn walls and ground. Windows were shattered and walls turned into bee hives from numerous bullet holes.

"Go f*ck yourself, Qing Shui Li! You're starving me by prohibiting the cultivation of Crystal Pea!"

A procession flooded the street, and Chang was engulfed by the crowd.

These men and women, they yelled with signs in their hands. Their voices were exhausted from shouting, but they never stopped. They even brought up Zhuo, who had passed away four years ago.

"F*ck you, Hang Xie and Qing Shui Li! You stopped giving out

Crystal Peas, and instead gave something that can't even be harvested after a month! What do we do with that? Are you trying to starve half of us to death?" The leader shouted himself hoarse. "Even though Zhuo was a bastard, at least he gave us the Crystal Pea!"

"What do we eat without the Crystal Pea?"

"What do we eat?" the protesters around Chang shouted out in unison.

"You want us to die, don't you? But we won't comply! If we die, you will die with us, too. It's unfair for you to live when we suffer!" someone in the crowd asserted.

"Exactly, we should die together!"

The number of protesters was tremendous. Most of their voices were husky, and the effort put into this procession might have been the largest compared to any other protest they might have take a part in. After all, the civilians were protesting for their faith in the old days, and now, it was for survival.

Chang meant to squeeze out from the crowd, but he failed to. He soon let the procession bring him forward as they were heading to the institute anyways.

He followed the flow of the procession and arrived at the outer ring of the research institute.

Only when the crowd stopped did he realize that the institute was beset.

The contingents of marchers and robbers gathered here, confronting the military, which was still guarding the institute soundly.

"Why won't you let us cultivate the Crystal Pea?"

"We need a reason for why you starve us!" The outcries of the protesters were like waves, surging forth.

Chang squeezed to the front as soon as he got to the institute. There, a platform was built for the spokesman, who was the person he'd seen when he came to the Institute for the first time, Hang Xie. He was now the mayor of Zhengzhou, as well as Qing Shui's spokesman.

"Quiet, quiet!" Hang stood on the platform, shouting through a megaphone in a husky voice. "Everyone, can I have your attention? I will resolve any questions you have today!"

"Tell us! Why did you stop giving us seeds of the Crystal Pea!" a protester shouted out in a rage.

"About the Crystal Pea, I believe we have informed you in the official letter. It is because the Crystal Pea is the sole host of a horrible parasite called Evil Moss. It can cause the extinction of

many species if we don't control it. Therefore..."

Chapter 128: All The Way To The North

"F*ck your political lies!" someone in the parade immediately refuted. "You're just trying to kill us, who cares about the destruction of the world and all those lies you tell. I'll kill you before that."

The crowd was outraged, constantly crashing against the fragile blockage.

"Everyone, please calm down." Hang wiped off the bean sized drop of sweat drooping from his temple. "You are all welcome to tell us your grievances, but no violence..."

Hang continued in explaining, but a bullet deprived him of the opportunity to continue.

The gunshot was sharp and clear. Hang fell on his back with his palm pressing on his chest.

"For justice!"

That gunshot triggered a riot. The crowd raged, howled, and soon the violence level rose for the military started shooting...

Things were little better in the area Chang stood.

Though he was less capable when compared to those super lives

he'd met, sneaking through these average humans wasn't a hard task for him at all. Before the crowd completely lost control, he broke through like a bullet and made his way to the research institute.

Those who were guarding the door recognized Chang's face and so the next bullet didn't fly toward him but the guy who came after him, an unlucky fellow.

The citizens generally had bad vision, and the street were packed with these kind of people. Most of the gunshots harmed the other rioters, and those who got injured were stomped beneath others' feet.

Chang only noticed that the riot had lost control when he turned his head after he entered the institute.

He had no trouble accessing zones of the institute with his identity. Soon, he found his way to Qing Shui's lab, where the man was mixing the reagents, still with a cool head.

"Everyone's on edge, I don't think the riot is going to stop." Without mentioning anything about the amphibia, Chang put his focus on the protest.

"It's... it's not a big deal, let them be." Qing Shui sighed. "If this didn't happen today, it would have happened on some other day anyway."

"Then what are you going to do about it? I think you still have a storage full of hard tacks, can't you just hand them out to calm them?"

"It's not going to work, those are for soothing the conflicts within the military. We don't have any spare to calm the people." Qing Shui shook his head. "So let them be. Once they tire themselves out, they'll just dismiss themselves on their own."

"I don't think it'll go the way you plan." The scene was still vivid in Chang's mind.

"I'll make another announcement if they don't stop by tomorrow. Except the military who has the antidote, my bacteria bomb will kill everyone in the city." The man's lips twitched. "I think that will solve the problem once and for all."

"Wait, you don't really need to do this." His words put Chang in shock.

"I'm just trying to prioritize issues to be solved. Compared to the Evil Moss, the citizens are doing no harm at all." Qing Shui finally put down the testing tube in the rack and withdrew his hands from the rubber gloves of the enclosed testing box. "Tell me, what happened to you?"

"I was... I was okay. As soon as your message was delivered, the ancestor of the amphibia, or we should call him Liu, he released me on the spot," Chang said. "You are a living deterrent."

"Really?" Qing Shui picked up Chang's arm, his tone full of excitement. "See, not only did he send you back, but he also owes you a favor for bringing this gift to me."

"What gift?" Chang looked around his body.

"Stop moving." Qing Shui removed a shiny stain of mucus from Chang's arm. "This is it."

The mucus came off like a thin layer of cells. Qing Shui placed it on microscope slide. "Amphibia's DNA."

"He must have left this piece deliberately," Qing Shui said, flipping the mucus over.

"Why though?"

"To demonstrate his good intentions," Qing Shui said. "He must be want to tell me that even though amphibias are stronger in nature, but with the gene modification technology, we humans will still be able to catch up with their evolution pace. No, what he really wants to say is..."

"It seems like it isn't completely impossible for us to cooperate." Qing Shui put down the microscope slide. "I can tell he is putting every bit of his effort in reproduction."

"That is very true. Without the reproduction ability, they will never prosper as a species that will potentially be a threat to

humanity. Unless they are similar to the Willow, otherwise I think the limitation for their species can be anticipated," Chang said, sharing his own thoughts.

"Speaking of that, how about you? Did you get hurt?" Qing Shui changed the topic.

"No, but one thing did indeed get trapped in my mind for a while. They said it was you that deliberately sent me to them, is this true?" Chang gazed into Qing Shui's eyes. "I didn't mind it, but I need an answer from you. After all, if that was you true intention, you would have known that they won't kill me, wouldn't you?"

His blazing eyes silenced Qing Shui.

"In fact, I didn't know they would catch you." After a long silence, Qing Shui avoided Chang's eyes, but soon he resumed the eye contact. "He was bluffing for sure."

"Ha... Alright, sure." Chang almost mapped Qing Shui's eyes by just looking at them, as if he could see through them right into his mind. "In fact, there's no point to talk about this now, because both you and the amphibia are much smarter than me. I won't know if you guys are bluffing or not, am I right?"

"Chang, if I were to trick you into anything, you would have noticed." Qing Shui heaved a long sigh.

"So, what's next?" Chang was tired of staring at Qing Shui, trying

to puzzle him out, and just waved his hand. "You want to study the gene structure of the amphibia and then confront the Willow barehanded?"

"Well, here is my plan, I'll try to dupe a weaker version of those amphibia, then we'll leave here," Qing Shui said. "The Willow, it's on its way to Zhengzhou."

"Wait, how can it be this fast?" Shocked by the fact, Chang almost jumped up. "Please, don't lie to me. It's impossible! I thought it was still in Wuhan a few days ago."

"Apparently it's growth rate is beyond any species. It'll reach Zhengzhou sooner than we thought. That's why I was saying the riot isn't a matter to be worried about, they'll die no matter what." Qing Shui shook his head.

"No way this is going to happen! You should announce this to the people!" Chang shouted out. "Everyone counts!"

"The timing hasn't come yet. Although Zhengzhou isn't far from Wuhan geographically, it'll take some time for the Willow to reach here. If I announce this news today, the riot will spread to the whole city, meaning more deaths."

"But you need to hurry!" Chang almost cried. "In estimation, when will the Willow reach Zhengzhou?"

"One to three months, depends on where it wants to go first,"

Qing Shui said. "I suspect its goal is to stretch his branches and roots over the whole planet. If it's going north first, then yes, in a month we'll all die. But if it wants to head south or east first, we'll have more time to prepare. No matter what, the clock is ticking and the day will come soon." Qing Shui inhaled deeply. "Therefore, I want to complete my research here first, then we'll leave this city forever. Before that, I'll announce the news. What do you think?"

Chapter 129: The Parcel

"Qing Shui, you need to make a wise decision, we can't be humanity's executioner, we just don't have the right to do this." Chang pressed his palm against his chest, sighing.

"I don't want people to die either," Qing Shui said in a soft voice, "but I have no other choices."

"Qing Shui,"—Chang grabbed on Qing Shui's shoulder—"now you have their genetic information, and I can tell you their shelter's location anytime. I would do anything for you, but please don't ever let me know your true intentions. I can't bear a heartbreak from betrayal, small or big."

"Chang, I won't hurt you in any way, trust me. Before you go, I spared some hardtacks from the storage, you should take some with you." Qing Shui's voice returned to a state of calm. "I know what we're facing ahead; even those who choose to cultivate the seeds that we just distributed, their crops will likely be destroyed by those rioters. The food shortage will come again, the riot may last for a long time, perhaps peace won't come until the Willow arrives."

"Thanks, Qing Shui. I'll take all the food and medication that you have prepared for me. I'll guard the little bar I have and won't come out until you ask." Chang looked up at the ceiling. "Your goal is the possession of the world, but mine is only to keep my family safe in these turbulent days. As long as I can protect Jing and Zhizhi under my wing, I am happy."

"Off you go, brother. I got you some weapons as well." Qing Shui pointed at the door, and from that Chang knew it was time to leave.

The supply was nicely wrapped in a parcel and placed in a backpack. Chang swung it on his back, then sneaked out of the institute at a quiet corner of the wall. He flipped over the wall without anyone noticing, leaving this place behind.

The rioters were still occupying the street. It seemed like they had learned their lesson from four years ago as Chang saw something different from last time. Then, besides some chaos, most of the people rioted due to fear, but this time was different.

Today, most of the people had an ulterior motive.

They were robbing, robbing for food and anything that could help to survive.

If the first riot was a complete disorder, then this one was an organized chaos. Most people were robbing other for food and weapons, while meaningless conflicts and fearful protesters were rarely seen.

It wasn't easy for Chang to make his way back to his bar. Since he was carrying a backpack, as well as walking alone on the street, those with evil intentions targeted him even though he avoided most of the crowd.

A lone man with a backpack couldn't be a more ideal target for robbery.

A backpack openly implied resources; walking alone entailed minimum risk. This was how a normal human thought, and it was also the way robbers saw it.

But sometimes luck was the last judge to determine if the logic worked.

So even though three gangs attempted to steal Chang's backpack, all of them ended up either fallen under his gunfire or badly wounded. The situation was totally against odds of success as those robbers gained nothing just lost.

Returning to the bar was a jumpy adventure, but fortunately, peace resided inside the building. Perhaps the troop sent by Qing Shui guarded the bar well for there were fewer rioters around this area.

Before Chang fished out his key for the iron door, someone from the inside quickly slid the door open and he glided into his home.

"Chang, welcome back!"

Jing, Zhizhi, and Sanpang had waited for him since a long time ago, and Zhizhi and Jing's abilities informed them of his presence from a good distance away.

"Good to see you guys again. It's dangerous out there, we'll stay indoor temporarily, until the riot calms," Chang said. "Most of the fights involve armed fighting, and any stray bullet can seriously injure all of you. So please stay indoors."

"What, what about me?" Sangpang's chubby finger pointed at himself.

After all, the reason for his stay was that he was in debt to Chang, and now that the fragile peace was broken, the inflation made money into a meaningless pile of paper. However, he felt it inappropriate to leave barehanded without paying back; but as an outsider of the family, he didn't think he belonged here either.

Sanpang found himself in a dilemma.

"Okay. Tell me, do you want to leave and find a way to reunite with your friends, or to stay here?" Chang tilted his head, thinking upon Sangpang's query. "I'll let you go if you want to leave, but you're also welcome to stay and I will make sure you have food as well. Choose wisely."

"Thank you, Chang." Sanpang was delighted by the offer. "There isn't really any choice to make. If you don't mind me staying, I want to stay."

"I am not as dumb as I look. You have connections with the higher ups of Zhengzhou and I know you are skillful. I certainly can't survive by myself out there. Nobody will complain for living longer."

"Alright, then stay and don't cause trouble for me. When I am away, please take care of Jing for me." Chang turned to Jing, messing her hair. "Please stay in the bar no matter what, please."

"..." Jing nodded, without affirming.

In this way, they came to a mutual agreement that they would stay in the bar regardless of how chaotic the world became.

Time flew past this tranquil place bit by bit.

On the first week of the riot, the rioters looted all available resources. On the second week, those who were short in food fell into complete craziness, desperately attacking places where they thought there was food stored.

And when the third week hit, some of the rioters thought about cultivating the new crop, but they refrained because of the long growth cycle.

The riot didn't stop until the fourth week.

An unconventional migration wave swept across the city, starting from the jungle. It was a bizarre migration wave, originating from the south of the jungle. They blotted out the sky and the land, and the pioneers were those with wings—grasshoppers, beetles, flies, mosquitoes, dragonflies, birds, and some mutated mammals with wings. They were all unique and

none of them shared high similarities with each other.

The tremendous amount of organisms migrated together. Some of them were natural enemies but they traveled together from the south to the north.

The flocks covered the sky like dark clouds.

Chang had heard about the plague of the grasshoppers back in the 70s, it was said that they formed an opaque dome wherever they passed.

However, the current migration wave was immense, the story of the 70s was incomparable to today's madness.

Not to mention the varieties of species seen here.

Zhengzhou was in complete darkness. Acres and acres of flocks shuttled over Zhengzhou, buzzing, squeaking, whistling, igniting the chaotic vibe to its highest.

"What is this! How magnificent!" Sanpang stood on the rooftop. "How many are there traveling!"

"Can you see any of them up there?" Chang was puzzled. "Even I can't make out many of them, so how is that possible for you?"

"Oh for god's sake, of course I can't see any of them. But listen to

the wings flapping and vibrating! Quacks and squeaks... And the daylight hasn't reached us in three days! This is the real doomsday!" Sanpang exclaimed. Then the next moment, a bird slapped him in the face.

"Watch out!" Chang made a prompt decision by chopping the bird in a half with his hand. He dragged Sanpang before the blood attracted other predators.

Following the death of that bird, as well as the bloom of blood, a brief disorder was brought to this area. Some of the fatigued organisms dived down for the corpse so that they could have a quick refill to their energy supply—but more of the bloodthirsty animals choose to ignore, continuing to flee to the north.

"Are they crazy?" Sangpang staggered along from the rooftop with a lingering fear. "If they're aiming to attack Zhengzhou, I promise that humanity will die under thirty minutes.

"But they seemed fearful, they flew by us without giving any notice."

Sanpang and Chang returned to the ground level.

"Exactly, they are fearful. Seems like something is happening in the south" Chang heaved a long sigh. "This is the worst possible situation for us."

"What situation?" Sanpang asked.

"The Willow is coming."

Chang closed his eyes, and a great scenario begun playing in his mind—A monumental willow rooted in Wuhan, from where it drained all of the city's energy, and its ambition growing beyond its home city...

Soon its branches become alive as individual wriggling serpents. They move out from Wuhan, heading north their priority. Wherever the branches voyage, the land is exhausted and all organisms become preys without any chance of escape. Lives seem meaningless and intelligence useless. Organisms unite as one and continue to live in other forms.

The Willow proceeds as it gnaws for energy, flooding toward the north, unstoppable.

Eventually, animals are shocked, intimidated, scared. They run in the opposite direction of where the the Willow is coming from, endeavoring to distance themselves from the death.

The speediest winged organisms are the first in this life-and-death contest. The land animals will perhaps catch up in a day or two.

"This is THE apocalypse..." Chang almost couldn't tell the difference between closing and opening his eyes as the world was at its darkest now. "What does the Willow want to do, is it trying to wrap the whole planet?"

The buzzing and chirping echoed loudly in this dark void, so Sanpang shouted his query in Chang's ear, "Chang, what should we do now?"

"Hey! What should we do? The Willow is coming!"

Chapter 130: Qing Shui XVII

"I don't know what to do either. We may need to evacuate the city along with the others." Chang pointed to the flocks that blotted out the sky, shouting, "We need to run!"

"Hahaha, I thought you met with Mr. Li a few days ago. Did he say something about the formal evacuation? What did he tell you?"

"He said that the public will find out the truth themselves, without anyone informing them." Chang held up his hands over his head so that feces wouldn't splash on it, he yelled, "I was confused initially - how is it possible that the public would learn of it without Qing Shui making a formal announcement? Now I know how!"

"Well, this is more spectacular than animal migration in East Africa!" Sanpang became excited.

"Of course, and the Willow is much more dreadful than an earthquake." Chang stared at those citizens who were cemented in place in a state of refusal.

"Wait, where are we going?" Sanpang asked in a shout, recklessly bumping into a girl while running.

"We'll follow Qing Shui, that's our best shot." Chang pulled the girl up, then continued dashing down the street.

"So, does he have a plan?" Sanpang's voice kept rising.

"What did you say? Speak louder, those animals are too noisy, I can't hear you."

The migration caused traffic in the air, and the flapping of wings and buzzing echoed throughout the city. The noise was even louder than the taking off of a plane. Chang felt that his head was spinning, and his good sense of navigation was disturbed.

"I said, where does he want to run?" Sanpang forced his voice to be even louder.

"What options do we have? Of course to the north! No one wants to go down south," Chang hollered in a husky voice. "Are you trying to tell me that you want to witness the Willow engulf the whole world? You are welcome to do so, but you won't have my company!"

"Wish I could be that witness though." Sanpang and Chang returned to the bar with feces coating their outfits. "But if its price is my life, I would rather not see it."

"Hahaha, of course." Chang shook his body to shake off the feces. "I wish I could meet the Willow too. I only know it's almighty, but I've never seen its appearance or face."

"Perhaps our only chance comes when we die in front of it,"

Sanpang murmured.

"You guys are back! I guess you need a cup of hot water."

Zhizhi showed up at the bar table where two disheartened men were cleaning themselves up. She poured a cup of hot water into a transparent mug, then pushed it to Chang.

"Hey! What about me?" Sanpang asked in a peculiar manner.

"I only have one arm, if you need water, then pour it yourself." Zhizhi pushed Sanpang away from her. She then helped Chang wipe off the feces in his hair. "What's happening out there?"

"It's a mess. Bugs and birds swamp the sky, as well as other mammals with wings. None of them hunt, they are as panic-stricken as stray dogs. They just... they just fly, as if they were marching." The hot water nourished Chang's dry throat. "The apocalypse is here. I think land animals and insects will catch up soon. We need to go before they arrive in Zhengzhou, otherwise the troubles they will cause will trap us here."

"Why?" Zhizhi asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Sanpang poured himself a cup of hot water and gulped it down. "Think about it, those who fly aren't in our way, but what about those who run? Let's face it, even tiny bugs can drown you if their numbers will be as great as those of the birds now."

"A pond of bugs that is two-meter deep. It will turn into reality a few days later."

Sanpang shivered from his own words while talking.

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's go now!" Apparently, Zhizhi was appalled by what Sanpang had just described.

"No rush, Qing Shui hasn't said anything yet, and that means the timing isn't right." Chang took a sip of water.

"Everything, you trust him with everything!" Jing walked out from her room with her own backpack and weapons. "I'm packed and ready to go. No day is better than today before the migration wave comes even closer."

"Jing, I know. We'll be leaving, the fast ones may arrive in Zhengzhou tomorrow," Chang said. "But before we go, can you just wait for two hours, I really need to check out what is going on with Qing Shui."

"Okay, okay! Hurry up!" Zhizhi urged, still trying to clean up Chang's hair.

"Thanks, Zhizhi, but wiping won't help since I am heading out again." Chang shook his head, pushing away Zhizhi's towel. The darkness awaited him outside the door, having taken over the sky a long time ago.

"I'll be right back."

Since Chang wasn't encumbered by Sanpang this time, his speed soared to his highest. The street was narrow, but he bolted through it as a dark shadow. His feet rapidly pounded on the ground, producing a rhythmical beat.

Soon, he went through half of the city, and the institute ahead appeared to be more chaotic than ever. The military had lost control of its soldiers who were busy lifting and removing resources from the storage.

Chang almost broke into Qing Shui's lab.

In opposition to the chaos outside, the lab was still serene and tranquil, the owner of which had a baby in his arms, who he was feeding through a nursing bottle.

"What the hell? Are you kidding me?" Chang's eyes almost popped out at seeing that. "What's wrong with you? I didn't know you have such deep maternal instincts."

Chang approached the baby quietly. The baby hadn't opened his eyes yet, his thin lips moved back and forth while sucking the thick matter from the bottle. It couldn't be milk in the bottle, as the texture was far different from it. The baby was swaddled, and there was a numeric tag on the cloth, "17".

"Whose infant is he?" Chang asked.

"Mine," Qing Shui answered.

"Stop joking, please! Who he belongs to, seriously?" Chang was agitated. "The apocalypse is here! Why are you holding someone else's kid? Who is he? Does he belong to your relatives?"

"This is my kid, I mean it." Qing Shui stared at Chang in a serious manner. "He is me, actually."

"Wait, what does that mean?" Chang sensed Qing Shui's attitude. "But I didn't know you were married, neither did I see you dating someone."

"Say hello to my kid, Chang. He is my 17th clone - Qing Shui [XVII](#)."

In Italy, 17 is considered an unlucky number. One anagram of the Roman numeral XVII is VIXI, which in Latin translates as "I have lived", with the implication "My life is over" or "I'm dead". Some Alitalia planes have no row 17, some Italian hotels have no room 17

Chapter 131: Family

"Clone?" Chang screamed. "And XVII?"

"You are right, XVII." The nursing bottle emptied, Qing Shui gently swung his arms. "Is it strange? Someone who cloned himself?"

"It's strange to me. But if this is the XVII, how many clones have you made so far?" Chang asked.

"Seventeen in total. This is the youngest. And the oldest is already three years old." Qing Shui waved his hand at Chang. "Come with me, I'll show you something."

"All right." In this state of darkness and chaos, they left humanity behind for a fictitious land of peace - Qing Shui's hidden lab.

As Chang expected, more transparent glass containers were stored in here, and they were filled with clone babies, one per each. Looking back and forth between the babies and Qing Shui, an unspeakably strange feeling rose in Chang's heart.

"They are all you?"

"They are all me. The survival rate was poor, only seventeen of them survived."

They walked to the end of the hallway where Qing Shui placed his index finger on the fingerprint scanner. The bulky door opened inwardly, revealing soldiers looking after the children. The oldest ran around and seemed to be three or four years old. The youngest was the one in Qing Shui's arms.

"Out of these seventeen children, can you take three with you?" Qing Shui pointed at the oldest three children. "Qing, Shui, Shui Qing, come here!"

"Hi, papa." The kids sneaked out from the soldiers. Their ages seemed close to each other, meaning that they were all about three years old. Running and walking on their own wasn't a difficult task for them.

"Take them for me, please. They are easy to take care of since they are the oldest of my clones." Qing Shui pushed on their backs gently. "I have made arrangements for the others already. These three shouldn't bring you a lot of trouble as they are just as the same as me... They will be offering great help in the future."

"What about you?"

"I am staying." Qing Shui drew a long breath of relief. "I want to meet the Willow."

"Are you crazy?" Chang shouted loudly. His voice was so high that it scared some of the infants. "No! I am not allowing this, you are seeking death!"

"I have my own plan, please don't stop me."

"I know you always have plans and you are thoughtful in every aspect that I know. But seriously, I think you are making an unwise decision." Chang frowned as if he would never loosen his brows until Qing Shui changed his mind. He pulled his friend's arm.

"Let's leave here, please. What do you think you are doing? Seeing the Willow means you'll die right away! This isn't a joke anymore! I believed that you weren't afraid of the Amphibias, fine! But how dare you say that you want to confront the Willow? And you, are you sure that you can handle the consequences? Qing Shui, this isn't cool, this is unnecessary sacrifice and I won't let this happen!"

"I... I wanted to talk to it since a long time ago. I've made up my mind, and in the best scenario, I can probably keep my life!" Qing Shui pulled his arm out from Chang's grasp. "What is it thinking? Isn't that fascinating?"

"Well, I want to know what is in your mind!" Chang patted his forehead, eyes closed. "How many brains do you have? One! And do you know how many brains it has? A million or even more! Do you think it has the need to negotiate with you?"

"It has." Qing Shui took out a vial, which Chang remembered - Evil Moss.

"Okay, How is this going to help?"

"Of course it is helpful. I grew a lot of them in my experimental field. They are my best bet if I detonate this institute. This will be the biggest threat to the Willow."

"I am still confused. The Willow is almost almighty as far as I know." Chang wasn't persuaded.

"Well, even this won't cause death to it, but it will negatively impact its power for certain. It won't kill me immediately, and this is my bargain with it," Qing Shui said.

"And then what? I don't see any meaning in you talking to it."

"I have my own plan," Qing Shui repeated. He didn't want to give out additional explanations. "You don't need to attempt to stop me, no one can convince me to give up."

"..." Chang didn't have anything else to say and responded with a long silence.

He knew it, he knew it with his heart that there was absolutely nothing he could do. He thought Qing Shui's decision was the dumbest that he's ever made, but he had no power in changing that.

"Why don't you leave? Is there anything more important to you than your own life?" These fragile words sneaked out from Chang's lips.

"There is. You guys. You guys are more important than my life."

"What?"

"I said family is more important than anything, even my own life." Qing Shui smiled wanly. An expression that was never seen by anyone.

"Do you know how much I cherish the relationship between the three of us, you, Jing, and me? I cherish it more than any of you, and I had never had this feeling before. It's amazing to have somebody that still remembers me, to still have somebody that I can take care of.

"However, historically speaking, smart people usually end up betrayed. Nobody believes in them.

"At first, Jing had an objection to seeing me, and then, you. In fact, the longer we stayed together, the further the distance grew between us. Because no one will fully trust someone that is smarter than them. Every single second when I was with you, I felt that you and Jing were on guard against me. You are afraid of betrayal too, so you would rather distrust me first to protect yourself. I noticed that you might have a feeling that you can never see through my thoughts, and that's why you won't believe me."

"But I trust you a lot!" Chang was immediately interrupted after his statement.

"Come on. If you trusted me, there wouldn't be any doubt. Do you remember how you questioned me for what the Amphibias said?" Qing Shui looked Chang in the eyes. "If he was sowing dissension between you and Jing, or Zhizhi, would you have ever doubted them?"

"I would never doubt, and I didn't doubt your motivation either! Qing Shui, you are being too sensitive!"

"Let's take a step back. What do you think of Zhizhi? How long did you know her and how long have we known each other? Didn't we go through more life-and-death battles than you and her? In terms of help, which one of us do you think is more supportive?" Qing Shui smiled again but he lowered his head. "Really, ask yourself, which one do you trust more? Me or her?"

"I understand and respect you, Chang. Even though you doubt me in the cruelest way, I still persuade myself that you still trust me."

"Qing Shui, we are friends!"

"But you will only treat me as a friend, not a family member."

"To be honest with you, this, this makes me sad," Qing Shui said softly. "We probably won't see each other again, so I want to tell you..."

"I cherish the days we spent together and the relationship we built along the way more than anyone." Qing Shui took a deep breath, as if he was disguising sobs. He never looked at Chang again, just pushed him with the kids out the door. "Go, my dear... friend. I'll be here, waiting for the Willow."

"Are you really not leaving with us?" Chang didn't know how to handle this situation besides offering one last invitation to Qing Shui.

"No, I am not. I will be here, and I will stop it for three years." Qing Shui wouldn't speak again, even when Chang shouted again. He commanded his soldiers to force them to leave.

A sudden urge of fatigue hit Chang. Even if he was unwilling to leave this serene man behind, he felt dizzy and lost the strength in his arms. Soon, he was confused about time and found it difficult to breathe. All the sensations intensified until he lost his consciousness.

Chang was lost.

The world became slightly clearer when he opened his eyes. He was expecting to see the brightness of Qing Shui's lab, but it turned out he was in front of his own bar. There was no one else, but three little children cuddled together in his arms.

"What happened..." Chang's eyes were wide, and so were the kids'.

At the same time, someone opened the door and Zhizhi dragged Chang's jacket from the back.

"What are you doing out here? Standing all the time? And you seem like you've gone blackout." Zhizhi was surprised when she noticed the kids. "Who are they? Where did you get them from?"

"They are Qing Shui's... kids." Chang answered.

"What?" Sanpang joined the conversation. "I didn't know he is so.... amorous."

"Well..." Chang nodded but didn't give any explanation. He didn't want to reveal that these children were clones because two of his family disliked Qing Shui.

Jing didn't really talk to Qing Shui since the beginning.

And Zhizhi hated him after her amputation and all the experiments that he had done on her.

Plus, it was hard for Chang to admit that the kids were clones in itself, so he didn't discredit Sanpang's observation.

"Wow, he has three kids! I can't believe we've never met any of them these four years," said Zhizhi. "And they all look like him! From that alone I know you aren't making this up."

"True." Sanpang stroked one of the children's head's, the soft hair. "They are almost identical except for their height, can't really tell what makes them different!"

"Though, where is Qing Shui himself?" Zhizhi sniffed the air. "He isn't around."

"He is still in the institute." Chang felt conflicted when he was asked about Qing Shui.

"Is he seriously joking? The Willow is coming and he isn't moving to anywhere else?" Jing walked out from her room, her jacket in her hand.

"I wasn't able to convince him. And I don't think any of you can. Let's... just pack. I'll explain later, when we leave." Chang directed the children to the sofa to sit on, then he went back to his room to pack his weapons and food.

The children were well-behaved. They stared at the other four adults in the room, neither speaking nor smiling.

Chapter 132: Luxurious Peace

Chang categorized food and weapons into different backpacks, the heaviest of which he carried on his back. The other four were evenly distributed to Zhizhi and Sanpang. He then hunkered down, gently patting the kids on their backs. "Come, I'll carry you."

"We can walk by ourselves," one of them said. "We may be weaker than you, but we are just as capable as a normal adult in physical strength. We'll follow along."

"How about..." Chang turned his head and tried to think of a way to persuade them, but then he realized these kids were actually Qing Shui himself. "Alright," he finally agreed.

Chang nodded to Jing. "You aren't responsible for any backpacks, so keep an eye on the kids. They are all well-behaved, so it shouldn't be too troublesome."

"No problem." Jing smirked and asked the boys, "Can you follow closely after me?"

"We can," the boys answered in sync.

While Jing sat down trying to get to know the boys, Chang, Sanpang, and Zhizhi conducted a throughout check of the bar to make sure they didn't miss any critical items.

"Where are we going?" Jing asked, holding on to the boys' hand.

"I don't know exactly where..." Chang shook his head. "I thought Qing Shui was going to come along, but I am lost now when he withdrew from our plan..."

Chang spoke of Qing Shui with an unconscious pathos. In the past years, he ignored the distance growing between them deliberately. Just as he was told, Qing Shui had never done anything disloyal to their friendship, and he had been continuously providing help that he didn't even ask for; he treated him as a family member, yet Chang himself began to avoid conversations...

Now, Chang was leaving with his clique, and Qing Shui decided to stay. They would never meet each other again, given what Qing Shui was going to confront.

Qing Shui wasn't even a well-matched opponent to the Willow, regardless of intelligence or physical capability. Chang doubted he could ever stop the Willow. Even if he could, Chang didn't think that Willow would ever skip obtaining one of the most brilliant minds on this planet.

He may become one of the millions, and he may also become one of the Willow's favorite.

Therefore, although Qing Shui was capable—since his encephalon mutation four years ago, he could snap off Zhuo's neck effortlessly—Chang had no idea what he had become now. The

only thing he learned from their last conversation was that Qing Shui had been faking his confidence.

Qing Shui never panicked, neither felt uneasy about any situation they faced, even with Zhuo.

However, when he said goodbye to Chang, it was his first time making a definite promise, guaranteeing that he would stop the Willow for three years.

His promise sounded like a slogan more than anything practical. Qing Shui would never do that unless he no longer possessed his confidence

Thus, his death was something already predicted.

Thinking of this, Chang's chest congested with sorrow. He couldn't say anything, his mind overtaking with nostalgia. The others sensed the weight in the air, but they failed to notice the reason for it, and hence they started pressing him.

"Hey! Say something!" Zhizhi shook his arm.

"Yes." Chang took a deep breath to stabilize his emotions from leaking out from his eye sockets. He knew time didn't wait for anyone, and it certainly wouldn't stop to give time for his sorrow. "We should head north. We can go the North Eastern part of China, or even to Russia! After all, the Willow is in the south now, and there is no way we'll head down.

"In the east, there is the ocean, which is too misery and dangerous now, and the west won't be a wise choice since the land there is too complicated. All the way to the north, it'll be freezing over there. But at high altitudes, there will be fewer species, and that means safety! What do you guys think?"

"I think this is a good idea. My grandfather was from the North East, and I've always wanted to visit but never went there." Sanpang was the first to agree on this proposal. "It should be our safest destination as long as we stay away from the coast."

"But... Isn't it too far?" Zhizhi was more considerate regarding realistic thinking. "The distance from Henan to the North East is more than a thousand kilometers, and we also need to pass through an enormous jungle, how will we get there?"

"Zhizhi is right! Four years ago, the company of soldiers was annihilated in just eighty kilometers from Kaifeng to Zhengzhou. We can't make it to the North East, can we?" Jing was also worried. "And don't forget that we are walking..."

"We'll figure it out on the way... There are plenty of mega-cities along the way. Tianjin, Beijing, Shijiazhuang, where we should find large bases of survivors. We can set one of these cities as our goal, and we can stay there for a while to see if there is any more migration. If there is, we'll flee with them to the North East," Chang said. "The North East or Russia is our ultimate goal. For now, we'll head to the north, and make sure we have sufficient compasses."

"I guess this is the only way out." Zhizhi nodded in agreement. "We still have a lot of compasses left, as well as flashlights and goggles."

"Sounds good. So we'll leave right away before the cities evacuate." Chang sighed. "Sometimes it's good to have people leave altogether, but when the crowd is too big, it becomes a mess. This is perfect timing when people are still hesitating. We'll leave as soon as the birds clear up."

"We'll do as you say." Zhizhi sniffed the air. "The density is decreasing, and we can leave soon."

"All right, while we wait, let's recheck our resources. Make sure things like compasses aren't left behind. Otherwise it'll be hard to come back once we depart."

"Got'ya."

The others returned to their rooms.

Chang himself strolled to the bar chair and sat down. There they were, the same old desks, the counter, the ceiling, the liquors, and candles. But Chang gazed at each of them, staring.

The marks and imprints of his four-year peaceful life were about to be abandoned for an indefinite duration. Memories of Jing bawling, the cigarette gifted by Qing Shui, and that wild laughter of Zhizhi silently deepened Chang's despair in this doomed world.

Chapter 133: Autistic

While Chang was about to say goodbye to his memory, he took out a pack of cigarettes from a drawer in the bar counter. Qing Shui gifted the pack to him, but he'd never learned how to smoke, even after four years. The act of lifting the cigarette was more of a habit than smoking itself.

Chang only did it when he felt unhappy. The smoke swirled up in the air, twisting, hovering. It was nostalgia that he was smoking, not nicotine.

The smoke reminded him of a slang that people used online back in the day - "floating clouds."

He wished everything that happened and would happen were just floating clouds that eventually went away; he wished that all of this was just a dream that he could wake up from so he could have his carefree life back; he wished the only thing that he needed to worry about was the reading that he never finished and the pretty girl beside some louts.

He was always reminded of the good days when he had time to sit down by himself. Though his stiff facial muscles inhibited his facial expressions, his lightheartedness shined through his eyes instead.

The five minutes of memories fade out in black as the smoke dispersed. His family and friends were history now. The clamor resumed and pulled him back into reality.

"Hah—" Chang forced out the air in his lungs, lifting the weight placed on his heart. He stomped on the cigarette, shouting, "Let's go, folks. The birds have passed our area."

"Yes, it's about time," Zhizhi agreed, sniffing the air. "Let's come together, guys."

As they expected, the buzzing noise decreased significantly when they walked out of the bar. The sky was brighter once the flocks were sparser and more scattered. The remaining fliers were either clumsy or slow insects.

The sunlight brightened up the red fog, returning an acceptable vision to humans.

"It's a good day, isn't it?" Chang didn't turn back when he said so.

The streets weren't crowded at all, and this was not only because of the massive migration but also because of a natural human fear of the darkness.

Though of course there were some brave ones who peaked out from their homes, seeking an opportunity to retreat with the birds.

Just right after Chang left his home, they encountered another group of backpackers who initiated a conversation with them.

The one who spoke was a young woman. She had with her a teenage boy and a conjoined twin.

"Hello!" They met at the junction. The woman approached Chang after seeing three young kids walking after him. She was confused initially, but then she quickly approached him and said, "Hey, do you want to travel together? We can look after each other."

"I don't think we need any more companions on this journey." Chang shot a glance at the woman; she was way too weak and apparently she was alone. He wouldn't gain any benefits but just burden.

"I see, but why the indifferent attitude? We have something in common - We both have kids." The woman didn't give up even though Chang ignored her.

"I am not indifferent, I just don't think your proposal is benefiting any of us." Chang sped up while speaking.

"Well, we can look after each other, especially with the kids. You probably can tell I am not a bad person already since I bring them with me. The gangsters usually won't mob groups with kids either, so I won't cause any trouble for you." The woman kept trying to convince Chang.

"However, you and your kids will become a burden to me, instead of helping in any way." Chang discovered another three cliques that were following the migration with his vision.

"I promise I won't, I actually walk reasonably fast." The woman smiled, but Chang still lacked interest in collaborating. "Plus, I am good at navigating! My profession was a geologist back then. You can tell me where are you going to, I can show you the way there!"

"Oh?" Chang slowed down a bit.

The woman noticed she had successfully intrigued Chang, so she kept going, "Listen, my judgment of topographic features and source of water is almost 100% accurate; if you want to save time and avoid walking in the wrong way, I am the expert that you want to bring on your team."

"Okay." Chang nodded, his attitude somewhat elusive. "I guess, welcome."

"Thanks." The woman reached out her hand to Chang, who didn't show interest in shaking it at all, she then withdrew and shrugged. "My name is [Yin Qing](#), Qing as my last name. What about you?" she asked.

"Oh, I am Chang Liu." Chang turned his head to Zhizhi. "Should we make a stop at the Hua Yuan community? We can pick up Dr. Huang. After all, she saved us too, and we can't leave her behind."

"Sure." Zhizhi nodded, her arm had been treated by Dr. Huang.

Chang resumed the conversation with Yin. "Why us? I've seen other groups too. What made you make this hasty decision? And

your last name is very uncommon."

"Well I just told you my reason, we all have kids." Yin Qing grinned. "It just gave me a sense of safety."

"Really?" Chang stared at Yin Qing's bright eyes. "There should be something else, am I right?"

"You're pretty sensitive in this." Yin Qing giggled. "Because... I think you guys are somewhat powerful."

"How did you....?" Chang recalled how they met—Yin Qing had only landed her eyes on him for a few seconds, and she decided to come forward immediately.

"First of all, you have a beautiful handgun, it looks even better than the most expensive ones on the market," Yin Qing analyzed. "Second, I don't see any fear in your eyes, and you don't even take precautions against other groups; I noticed that when our eyes met, there was zero anxiety in you. You are either super powerful, or you are super dull.

"And the third is proof of your abilities. The four behind you were just as calm as you, as if this apocalypse isn't a threat to them at all, even if one of them is so young." The woman kept analyzing while looking at Shui and Shui Qing. "Though these two's calmness creeps me out, they are more stable than a lot of adults. Pardon my question, but are they autistic?"

An explanation for Yin Qing's name:

Yin means music, melody. Qing as a surname is rare, meaning a state of lucid mind or simply pure.

Chapter 134: Single Day

"Oh no, they don't have autism." Chang turned around, stroking the clones' hair. "Instead, I think they think we are foolish."

"Really?" Yin Qin wrapped her arms around her own kid. "Then we must be strange and foolish to them as well."

"Maybe, they must have a different outlook on the world than us." Chang tilted his head. The two-headed kid had both a girl's and boy's faces. They started whispering and giggling among themselves when they noticed that Chang was looking at them.

"Don't you think they are perfect? They are never lonely." Chang forced a smile.

"They are, but they fight all the time." Yin Qing sighed. "My girl is bossy, and she gets to eat all the food while my boy... he is nice enough to take all her temper."

"This isn't fair!" Chang rolled his eyes, he couldn't help thinking how the boy couldn't get to eat anything all the time even though they shared the same body. "If I were the boy, I would fight for what I ought to get."

"Therefore, you are not a gentleman." Yin Qing chuckled. "From when you refused to help a lady, I was aware that my boy is a better gentleman than you."

"Well, I don't care if I am less than anyone." Chang heaved a sigh. "I can't be a gentleman for everyone on the street! I can only care for the people under my wing, and I am happy enough that they are safe."

"Me too, actually." Yin Qing wrapped her arms tighter around her two and a half kids. "You guys must be tired."

"A little," the boy's head said.

"No, you are not!" The girl almost shouted. "Mommy carries all the stuff, and we didn't even walk that much. How dare you say that you're tired?"

"So... sorry..." The boy lowered his head.

"Your daughter is very considerate." Chang laughed and resumed the march.

The group traveled through Zhengzhou. Before leaving, they picked up Dr. Huang, who still hadn't figured out what was happening in her community. She quickly agreed to come along once Chang explained the reason for the animal migration.

Upon the reunion with Dr. Huang, the clique headed toward the north of Zhengzhou, where they entered the jungle.

"The G4 expressway is right ahead of us; it connects Beijing, Hong Kong, and Macau, meaning that it connects the major cities

from the very south of the country up to Beijing. Let's walk along this expressway. By the way, where is your destination again?"

The expressway was shattered and almost hidden by the plants, the trace of it was barely distinguishable. Yin Qing stared at the paper map. "If we march along this expressway toward the north, the next major city will be Xin Xiang. However, I'm concerned about the distance that we need to travel - it's impossible to finish the journey in one day, we must stay in the jungle for at least a night."

"In fact, we haven't decided on a destination." Chang looked back to Zhengzhou, and the birds flying overhead. "Our idea is to keep traveling to the north; do you remember the reason I told you? There is an organism migrating to the north as well, and it is taking lives along its way. Our goal is to avoid it as much as we can. But our final destination is unclear."

"I see. I had the same mentality as you when I witnessed the migration. Something atypical must be happening - I couldn't find any other reason behind the phenomenon with my knowledge." Yin Qing kept patting her kids' back. "I thought it must be a catastrophic disaster. But you just said it's because of a migrating gigantic organism. I wonder what it looks like exactly, how it managed to make billions of organisms flee?"

"Well, I can only say it's something that you've never seen, and its size must be greater than Zhengzhou now." Chang lowered his head, reading the map in his hand. "The only fact I know is that, if it arrives, we'll all die. Therefore, there is no point to discuss how big it is. We already known the one and only consequence of its

arrival. I think this is a very reasonable basis on which we should flee with the birds and insects."

"Well, I guess we'll plan as we go. What do you think of Xin Xiang as our next destination?"

"Sounds good." Chang rolled up the map, the unpredictable journey ahead worried him, but he had no choice but to accept the reality and what it may bring.

The clique was lucky, the jungle didn't give them too much trouble when they journeyed through it. The afternoon was well spent as they trotted for more than thirty kilometers. In time, the sun began hiding its face behind the horizon, and their shadows on the ground started growing longer and longer.

When the world lost its last beam of light, they stopped.

"Let's call it a day." Yin Qing almost got dragged down by her bags on the back. "Hiking with all this weight is tiring, you're outstanding in how much energy you've got." She gasped for breath.

Chang carried most of the weight along the way. Besides his own luggage, he also took turns in carrying Zhizhi's portion as well, and he didn't show any sign of fatigue. Yin Qing found that amusingly impressive.

"The march is nothing, I'm just worried that we might encounter

dangers." Chang gazed at the sky. "Though fortunately the migration also took away most of the animals here. I saw the departure of the organisms with the great migration. It's relatively safe here now," Chang explained. "Otherwise, we wouldn't have made it this far today."

The bonfire was started on the spot and Chang constructed a simple hearth for the pot, in which he put a few piece of hardtack and poured water for boiling.

Animals were scared of fire. Regardless how far they had evolved, as long as they weren't as intelligent as humans, they would stay away from the fire. This was an instinctive reaction, and Chang made use of it; the bonfire was constantly stoked, as a warning to the animals remaining in the jungle.

Zhizhi was tacit. She took out a ladle from her luggage, seemingly experienced in cooking this biscuit porridge.

Yin Qing knew that she wouldn't get a share from Chang, so she distributed her own food among her family - to a teen and her two-headed kid.

"Is he your brother?" Chang pointed at the teen.

"No, he is my nephew," Yin Qing answered. "Most of my relatives died, but he somehow survived, and he was like a younger brother to me since a long time ago. "

"I see." Chang nodded. "What about... them? They are sharing one body, so they share the same set of organs?"

"Exactly, except their minds are separated and independent." Yin Qing sighed. "They are all well-behaved."

"I can tell." The two-headed kid was playing rock-paper-scissors to decide which one would be eating. Chang was intrigued and asked, "Is that how you guys decide which one of you gets to eat? Whoever wins eats?"

"Humph!" The girl looked away, but the boy explained, "No, usually she gets to eat. Mama said to her that she should stop taking advantage of me, and that's why we are trying to decide who eats today. Usually, I feel full without taking a bite."

"This must be a weird sensation!" Chang laughed wholeheartedly. He scooped out some of his biscuit porridge into a small bowl and handed to the two-headed kid. "Here you go, you guys should share some hot food together. Otherwise, the moist and coldness in the jungle may make you sick."

"And you three,"—Chang was speaking to the mini Qing Shuis—"you should have some of the porridge too."

The clones were obedient, they gulped the porridge without commenting anything.

During the dinner, Chang kept talking to Yin Qing - After all, he

wanted to know more about this newly joined family to ensure that they weren't harmful to his family.

Although Yin Qing didn't seem like a wrongdoer, Chang was still skeptical about her motivation. And apparently the latter thought the same, so dinner consisted of both simple food and deliberated questions between the two.

"I don't think I've asked you before, how did you know the identity of the organism that is causing this migration?" Yin Qing put down her food. "From what I know, all the communication channels between the citizens were intercepted by the red fog or simple destruction. If you know it so well, you must've either met it, or know someone from the military who possesses a high position. I heard they managed to resume communications of some sort."

"Well, I myself don't belong to the military, but you are correct, I know someone from there. He told me this," Chang said. "So I know this disaster isn't something I can deal with. I think he'll announce the news to the city in a day or two. By the time it arrives, it'll be too late to leave."

"You are right, evacuation for millions of citizens isn't easy. It'll be an enormous mess!" Yin Qing exclaimed. "I'm just glad that I left a day in advance."

"Yes, but also keep in mind that good days won't last for long. We might have a hard time traveling when land animals catch up later." Chang smiled rigidly, stoking the bonfire. The tip of the fire roared to the sky when he flicked the branches underneath. He

then distributed the sleeping bags to others. "Let's rest today, I'll keep watch tonight."

Chang covered his lower body with his own sleeping bag, but he didn't lay down. He leaned on a tree trunk, keeping his eyes opened.

The rest laid down, not talking much today because of the fatigue. The clones quietly walked to Chang, placing their heads on Chang's legs.

At midnight.

The birds stopped chirping, but the insects continued to creak. The symphony in this jungle never ended. Under the disguise of the high-pitched creaking, Chang spoke in low voice, seemingly speaking to no one. "Guys, are you asleep?"

"No," the clones answered altogether.

"Can I ask you some questions?"

"Go ahead," one of them said. "This is exactly the reason why we came with you in the first place."

Chapter 135: Last Bout of Mania

"Just as I expected you guys would be, you deserve to be Qing Shui's clones." Chang kept his eyes closed. "I just have few questions; you don't need to answer if you don't want to."

"The first question is dumb, but this is what I'm most curious too. Do you, as clones, possess Qing Shui's memories?"

"No, we don't. We are independent of him and each other. We have different thought processes and personalities. The only thing that we have in common is the genes, which are identical to Qing Shui's. But keep this in mind, we are different because we encountered different things and that shaped us as humans," Qing, the oldest said. "Just like how twins can have opposite personalities."

"One thing that surprised us is that the way of thinking among us is similar, so are our abilities."

"I understand that." Though Chang seemed asleep, his olfactory system was functioning at its peak to detect what was lurking in their surroundings. "Essentially, you aren't Qing Shui at all but someone else. It's just that you guys are similar to him in appearance and mind."

"Basically." Shui, the second oldest nodded.

"Then, here comes my second question." Chang took a deep breath through his nose. "Since you share the same genome as him,

do you guys have the same abilities and capabilities as him?"

Chang almost lost his control when asking this question. After all, if all the clones were similar to Qing Shui, the survival chance of their group would be almost 100%.

"Yes we are, but at the same time, no," Shui Qing, the youngest of the clones said. "We are still little; we simply can't fully utilize his abilities, it takes time."

"We inherited his abilities, but the limitation is that we will only be as powerful as he was four years ago," Shui Qing summarized.

"Wait, can you explain?" Chang asked.

"We were the first batch of clones that he made four years ago, and it took a year for us to be born. The age among us three isn't distinct, but in fact, we are four years old already, if you count the year spent growing," Qing said. "That also means, the genome in us is fairly old. We are replications of the Qing Shui from four years ago, before he underwent the second encephalon mutation.

"Even though we grew up and became stronger, the limitation is there, and this is something that we probably can't break through. We don't know how far Qing Shui has went with his own evolution, but what we are sure of is that he must have gone through multiple encephalon mutations already. He is crazy and maniacal, but he hid that well. Zhuo is no longer comparable to him. If we were to name someone who has similar abilities to him, that it would be XVII.

"XVII is the latest success from a year ago. The more powerful Qing Shui became, the lower the success rate. I'm pretty sure he didn't produce any clones successfully in this recent year. Therefore, no one actually knows how powerful he is now.

"Though what I can tell you is that, there aren't many that are more powerful than him."

"Wait, does that mean there is hope for Qing Shui to stay alive?" Chang's eyes went wide in surprise.

"No, the chance of survival is zero," Shui responded with a sneer. "No matter how capable he is now, he is still a baby to the Willow.

"You don't understand the Willow's physiological structure, but we studied it. The willow encompassed over millions of brains, can you imagine how much it knows? Although the accumulation isn't linear, the quantitative accumulation eventually leads to qualitative transformation. I doubt the Willow is still a being that we used to know. We just simply can't imagine what it can do," Shui said.

"Exactly." Shui Qing picked up the topic just right after Shui's statement. "Qing Shui is nowhere comparable to the Willow; I can assure you that it is impossible for him to win. The gap between how intelligent they are is probably similar to the gap in their physical capabilities."

"Is the difference really that high?" As if Chang was riding a

roller coaster, his heart now fell from the very peak to the bottom. "The Willow can destroy a city in a blink of an eye; it is at least a hundred thousand times stronger than Qing Shui in raw power. But really? Based on intelligence as well?"

"Well, Qing Shui could be a little smarter than we imagine, but I won't say he is anywhere close compared to the Willow," Qing said. "Don't have false hope for him. He is crazy; he is trying to challenge a god with his ordinary human brain. And the only result possible is vanishing without knowing why."

"What you've said makes me very uncomfortable... Won't you guys be sad if he dies?" The eyes under Chang's eyelids were rolling. "After all, he is your family."

"Of course, we'll feel sorrow at his death, but we don't want to let you guys know about it explicitly," one of the clones said. "Plus, his existence puzzles us, none of us wanted to be a replication of someone else. Perhaps his death can solve our struggle."

"Ha! How cold-hearted you are." Chang tilted his head. "You guys are nothing like Qing Shui regarding this."

"We aren't indifferent," Shui Qing said. "We just don't express our deepest feelings with words and gestures."

"All right." Chang took a deep breath. "According to what you know, Qing Shui is doomed to die."

"Yes, he is."

"But if he is a baby compared to the Willow, then who can stop it in this world?" A surge of desperation hit Chang hard.

"I don't know. If you are thinking this way, humanity is way more fragile than it had expected," one of the clones said. "But you don't need to feel despair either; we had seven billions of people on this planet, there must be someone who can defeat it."

"Yes, I don't think Qing Shui is our only hope." The clones were surprisingly optimistic. "If the other species can mutate and evolve into a super life, why would you think that humans can't? There could have been a pioneer.

"Don't worry, even the seventeen of us can probably change something a few years later. Don't forget that we'll grow up too! The Willow will be stopped by other intelligent beings when it expands to a certain extent. And because it is way too intelligent and aggressive, any species with intelligence will become its enemy."

"We are not alone." The other two clones chuckled. "See, even though initially the amphibians refused to cooperate, they still agreed to take care of XVII at the end. We're just curious what XVII will turn out to be."

"Ha! Interesting, interesting," Qing commented, and they all stopped talking no matter how many more questions Chang asked them.

Chang soon lost interest in pushing further. Eventually, he emerged from his thoughts of Qing Shui and dreams took over.

The second day.

The clique left their camping site immediately upon sunrise, walking towards Xin Xiang.

At the same time, another wave swept across Zhengzhou—Qing Shui made an official announcement about the Willow through the military.

For a short while, the citizens completely lost control, the riot resumed, and it was more chaotic than ever.

The last few weeks, the commoners were suffering from unstable emotions and hopelessness. The shortage of food worsened the situation. And Qing Shui's message was a bomb, causing explosions in every corner.

And even the military rebelled when they heard it.

Any form of power was useless now.

The commoners started losing control in succession, and most of them began to attack each other. There were some severe cases where people completely lost their minds; they robbed food from

anyone they could for the upcoming march.

The city went crazy.

A lot of people attempted to break into the institute to take revenge against the one who caused the chaos, but the frenzied revenge seekers were terminated in only half an hour.

This was because everyone who entered lost signs of being alive as soon as they rushed into a three hundred meter circular zone of the institute. No exceptions.

The corpses layered up, forming a strange circular wall around the institute. They had all died facing the same direction, as if in a clear warning for the remainder of the mob. Whoever passed the line was certainly going to die.

Thus, after realizing revenge was unrealistic, most of the people swallowed down their anger and targeted something else.

The military was also banished from the institute, which later became a forbidden zone where only Qing Shui stayed by himself.

His lab was so quiet that if a pin dropped, the clinging would be crystal clear.

Qing Shui opened a bottle of wine, then swirled the burgundy liquid in a wine glass. He took a sip and froze for a moment, as if thinking of a solution for something.

"Another two days." His eyes lost focus. "I can meet you again in two days, Willow."

The red wine dripped down the glass' side when Qing Shui placed it, now empty, on the table. He then went passed a number of doors until he reached the most inner room. There was a surgical bed positioned at the center of the room. It was dark, but not because of the lack of illumination; a black wall absorbed most of the light.

Qing Shui's pupils contracted when he laid down on the surgical bed. In his right hand, there was a trigger, the only trigger in this room. The light above his head was as bright as if the gate of heaven had just opened up for him. Without a second thought, he flicked the trigger, and numerous needles reached down from the ceiling toward him, all of them precisely piercing his veins.

Chapter 136: Exile

Solutions of different colors were injected into Qing Shui's body from the needles.

If Chang was here, he would realize he recognized some of the solutions, though most of them would be foreign to him.

The injection didn't take long. They were soon finished, followed by the ordered withdrawal of the needles, which hid back in the ceiling, as if nothing had happened. In the silence in the room, Qing Shui's eyes reflected the great pain that he was suffering.

"Ahhhhh!"

His body quivered involuntarily. His skin turned red upon the injection of the solutions. His veins dilated and emerged on his forehead and temples.

"Urh...." His muscles wriggled as they expanded. Even the bones crackled.

Qing Shui repressed his trembles and flicked the trigger on the other side with his remaining consciousness.

Right after he did so, his index finger extended an extra inch. He was roaring, laughing, whining, until a thirty-centimeter titanium alloy shield rose up from the bottom of the surgical bed, enclosing him and silencing his howling.

No one would ever know what happened in here.

On the same day, at noon. Chang and his group reached the periphery of Xin Xiang.

"Here it is, our first stop." Yin Qing said softly, her eyes remaining on the map. The city was just as broken as Kaifeng.

"We made it." Jing stood beside Chang.

Xin Xiang was no different from other cities, with trees growing tall and weaving together, forming a corridor hovering over the streets. "This place brings back the memory when we were in Kaifeng four years ago. It was impossible to survive after leaving the military base."

"Time flows by without us realizing it, it's already been four years... Xin Xiang seems to be more damaged than Kaifeng; I wonder how many people survived." Chang walked into the empty green corridor, but the clones didn't follow up.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Qing Shui..." The clones faced the south. "Something went wrong with him."

"What has gone wrong?" Though Chang had prepared for Qing

Shui's death, he was still in shock of the news. He hustled. "Is it the Willow?"

"No." The clones closed their eyes. "We think he just broke himself... He basically reconstructed himself by breaking his genome and rebuilding from scratch. It was such a massive change that we can sense from even here."

"What is he trying to do?" the clones wondered among themselves.

"I don't know. This feels strange, but also powerful. Perhaps it's his final plunge."

"It can be, but... what if he can't make it before the Willow comes," Qing said in doubt.

"Well, I guess it's a fifty-fifty chance between life and death. What will he turn into eventually?" Shui asked Shui Qing.

"Don't ask me! He is such a nut, and I simply can't peak into his mind."

"Nuts, nuts!" Shui repeated.

"What nuts! Hey, why aren't you keeping up?"

Zhizhi shouted to the clones while walking up from the back. She

pinched Qing's ear when she saw them having stopped.

"Can you not stop in the middle of nowhere? Do you know it's dangerous?" Zhizhi shouted. "What if you get left behind? We can't always look for you!"

Zhizhi was anxious as if she was their mother. She kept lecturing them, "Even if you don't get lost, but what if something attacks you?"

"We'll solve it by ourselves." Qing patted off Zhizhi's hand. "We don't need to be taken care of anyways."

"You are just as stubborn as your father!" Zhizhi was triggered, and she could no longer control her rage, pinching Qing's ear again. "I was trying to do good for you! Otherwise, I wouldn't even bother to care."

"We don't need you to care for us." Qing flicked away her hand again. "What a rowdy woman you are."

"You!" Zhizhi was pulled away from Qing by Chang when she wanted to refute.

"Zhizhi, just leave them alone." Chang comforted both sides. "Next time, just keep up with us."

"Hum." Qing nodded, though he didn't even look at Zhizhi.

"You!"

Zhizhi stomped a few times to vent out her anger. She dashed to the front. "Qing Shui never fails to make me angry! Every single time! Even with his clones!"

...

Although Xin Xiang was desolate, Chang sensed that humans were still thriving in this city. They were probably not even the first who arrived in Xin Xiang after what happened.

A group merged from the other street and its leader initiated a conversation.

"Hey bro! Did you just arrive?" The group knew that Chang was also a fugitive, judging by his outfit and appearance.

"I did." Chang stopped as he wanted to get some news of Xin Xiang. "Have you met any locals yet? How long have you been here?"

"A little more than half an hour? The locals are gathered on the west side, and I just heard about this from a passerby. And that person told me that the locals started panicking as well. It seems like someone from Zhengzhou told them about the Willow half an hour ago."

"I see." Chang nodded. "Can't blame them, they must have seen the migration earlier and become concerned."

"Anyways, I think we should check the city out together. After all, the bigger the group, the safer we'll be." The other group was small, with only three people. Apparently, they were a family, and the one who spoke was its head.

"Yep, we shall go." Chang followed them, but he also secured a hand on his handgun.

In four years, mega cities became independent states one after another; he had no ideas what small cities had become. Yin Qing guided the whole group to the west side with her navigation skills. There they saw troops and markets, as well as cultivated fields in the urban area.

"Not a lot remains," Chang concluded, judging from the city's scale.

More than 75% of the population had vanished, and the city had shrank into a town. There were stores on both sides of the street, but the amount was limited due to lack of resources. The trading had returned to its primitive form - barter. The commodities were mainly food and weapons, and all currencies were abandoned.

Though there were patrols in the town, it seemed like an organized mess. The government was no longer an authority figure.

Some newcomers were wandering on the street, and some of them were stopped and questioned by residents.

"Things aren't too bad here. I'll supplement some water and food." Chang closely observed the residents; they were panicking mildly, but they hadn't gone crazy yet. So he left by himself and asked the rest to stay where they were. He went into a store and exchanged for some water and food with a sophisticated pistol.

Even if Chang wanted to carry more food and water, the size of his backpack limited the amount he could afford to have, so he had to constantly resupply. For long-term consideration, he decided to preserve the hard tacks that Qing Shui had given him, and feed his group with the food that he just had gained from the trade.

Chang didn't return until he collected all the information that he wanted to know.

"How's everything?" Zhizhi asked first.

"Neither bad nor good. The citizens are worrying. They don't know why the migration occurred, and they don't want to leave this comfort zone. Most of them are waiting and seeing." Chang stuffed the food into his backpack.

"Should we tell them what happened?" Yin Qing asked.

"I don't think that's a good idea. There will be someone in charge here telling the truth to the locals. They'll leave when they feel

they need to. Spreading the information we know isn't wise because very likely we'll be treated as liars. We don't want to get into trouble with the military personnel here," Chang said in almost a whisper.

"True," Zhizhi said. "Should we leave immediately then?"

"We'll leave now, before the people from Zhengzhou arrive. Don't forget that there will also be a migration of land animals, so we have to march as long as we can before things get difficult."

"So be it." Yin Qing nodded in agreement.

The group packed up after the discussion. They left the town quickly, before anyone started to pay attention to them.

The journey was still peaceful as the fright brought away most of the animals in the jungle. All they needed to be careful about were the immobile plants.

A day after the group left Xin Xiang, millions of citizens arrived here, pushing the city into a panic without any effort.

"Did you hear that a monster is coming from the south? It can destroy a city in a blink of an eye!"

The arrival of the news sowed fear in every corner of the city. None of the people hesitated anymore. They packed, they rioted, but in the end, they all migrated like the flying animals had done.

Meanwhile, in Zhengzhou, the ultra thick titanium alloy shield was broken apart from within. A being sat up.

Chapter 137: He is Dead

"Ha!"

The person sat up, heaving a long sigh. His feet lightly touched the ground as he slid down from the surgical bed.

The clothing he wore shattered with his motion. He was naked when he stood up.

The coldness on the floor reminded Qing Shui that he might be still alive. The person who was reflected in the mirror seemed unchanged. He still had brown eyes, and his muscles hadn't increased at all. His Cocktail Modifiers didn't transform him into a monster looking being. He was identical to what he used to look like, except for the fact that his hair grown white. He seemed drained.

He didn't seem different from an ordinary human, but if someone was standing next to him now, they'd notice a foreign sensation about him.

His cells went through numerous divisions and revivals which drained all his energy. Perhaps the foreign sensation was that he gave an impression of someone to be revered. Besides that, his presence would leave any being in awe. He didn't feel like a human being anymore.

As if he was a hoary god, he was much more potent than humans in essence. But he was also past his prime, and dying as well.

Qing Shui took his time to pace in front of the mirror. He bent to pick a suit and slowly put on the garments, everything from top to bottom, ending with a sophisticated tie. Now he was well-dressed,

Something neat but not too standing out.

Qing Shui felt that he had returned to his beloved school as a teacher. He was calm and knowledgeable. He combed through his gray hair, once and twice, then placed the comb back to its tray. He opened the drawer beside the cabinet, from where he took out a Walkman player.

It was a model from ten years ago and seemed like a device that he had used when he was still a student. A girl was laughing in the photo sticker that was stuck to the top lid of the Walkman, though time had taken the colors from her happiness.

A sentence was also engraved on the Walkman - To my love, Qing Shui, I wish you are always happy. Your sweetest, Dou.

His fingers fondled the engraving, and he smiled. He inserted two batteries in the device and put earplugs in his ears. Chopin's nocturne flew into him. It was peaceful and tranquil, but filled with sorrow.

He clipped the Walkman to his belt, then continued to fumble in the drawer until he located two photographs. One was of him and an aged man and woman, and it was very worn out. The other was

relatively new, with him, Chang, and Jing. All of them were wearing different expression in it.

Chang's smile was rigid, but anyone could tell that he had tried hard for it.

Qing Shui had a straight face; he seemed pensive.

While Jing had turned her face away from Qing Shui, so she didn't need to see him at all.

Qing Shui stared at the pictures for more than a minute, then he started chuckling. He stacked them together, made sure the edges were aligned before he tucked them into his pocket. He left the operation room to his lab, where he picked a bottle of wine from the crate under the lab desk that he had prepared for himself.

Violating the rule of drinking wine, he poured a full glass for himself, and he didn't seem to care. He almost gulped the wine, then poured another glass with the appropriate amount. He swirled the liquid, allowing enough time for oxidation. This time, he tasted with the music in his ears. Later, he walked out of the lab and took the elevator to the rooftop, where he sat down, gazing to the south.

"They all ran away." He seemed to be able to see as far as to the edge of Zhengzhou.

The ground started shaking, and a tremendous amount of beasts

fled from the sound, roaring out of fear.

This marvelous spectacle shook the city.

Billions of insects, beasts dashed for their lives to the north. The color of the ground turned black, and the coverage of animals was even bigger than the city. The running of an uncountable amount of legs shook the architecture in the city, and rubble and dust kept falling off from the buildings as if they were shedding. Something, something had flustered the animals.

Those who dashed at the very front were the quickest and strongest. Some were worms that were more than ten meters long; some were bulls; some just looked strange in shape. They rushed into Zhengzhou like bulldozers, making their own paths out when there were none, flattening the city under a cloud of dust that roared towards the sky. The buildings collapsed like domino blocks.

Those who came after the first wave were a little more clumsy compared to their pioneers but with more variety, such as spiders and monkats. They were no longer fierce and cruel. More accurately, they took off their layers of defense and invested more energy in the grand exile.

Some wounded ones slowed down and were left behind, but exile was never merciful to the weak, and they were immediately stomped into a pile of flesh and blood.

Qing Shui stood still on the rooftop, witnessing all that

happened. He seemed to care for the those lives, but at the same time, he seemed not to care either. He moved his attention to the very south, as if something over there could genuinely intrigue him.

Even though the herd crashed over most of Zhengzhou, they somehow avoided the institute. As if they sensed its danger by instinct, some of the slow ones would rather get stomped than step in the forbidden zone.

This applied to all who came, they veered right before they would enter the zone.

The herds were just nobodies sandwiched between two gods.

Therefore, nothing was Qing Shui's business except for the minor disturbance from the ground shaking. He was still tasting his wine in tranquility.

The wave lasted for longer than the flying animals' migration.

The herds fled for a day and a night, and the wave didn't seem to decrease its density until the second day's afternoon. Qing Shui had his half-emptied bottle of wine in hand and was still waiting.

The insects came the last, forming black waves on the ground. They were left last from the disadvantage of having smaller body sizes.

Finally, the ground shook more intensely than ever; something caused a drumming and rumbling to run through the city!

The deafening resonance came from afar, getting amplified in time. Eventually, the sound wave was so intense that it triggered an invisible tsunami.

The clouds of the insects arched over the ground, and skyscrapers were no longer able to stand tall. Their collapses resulted with the death of insects.

"Hey, Willow, here you are." The bottle of wine shattered, and the blood-colored wine splashed all over the floor.

The vibration was radical and violent, but Qing Shui stood still, like he always did, while the world fell apart in front of him.

The Willow had arrived.

In the jungle south of Zhengzhou, wickers dived in and out of the soil upon their fall from the sky. They were so many of them! Each one of them was almost one hundred meters in diameter. These astute wickers wriggled through, regardless of what organisms got in their way. They powdered them and absorbed them, turning them into tiny particles of this dome.

Perhaps the idea of one hundred meters was vague when one did compare them to anything. But one hundred meters could be the altitude of a mountain's peak.

The only thing known was the diameter of these wickers while their lengths were hidden in the dark. The number of them seemed uncountable as their motion blotted out the sky and covered the earth. They plunged in, creating caverns, and burst out toward the firmament. They moved like pythons or anacondas, but they were much more flexible.

Their greed was endless. They would gnaw and destroy everything in their way, and even split out smaller wickers to penetrate the earth, sucking out nutrients from the soil. They also raised their head to the sky and tore through the clouds to bathe in the radiance of the Sun so that the invasion would always be energetic.

There was nothing, nothing on this planet that had the same figure as the Willow. And there was nothing that could be as destructive as the Willow.

The wickers drowned souls and lives but flourished themselves. Every place they passed was left green. That green was so thick and rich that it almost gave out an illusion that the Willow spared lives under its cruelty. But the vibrant color came from homogeneity, for it strangled the diversity and arrogantly claimed its trophies from others' homeland.

This could have been a tribute of lives. The whole invasion was as smooth as if God had dropped down his hand from the heaven, with his fingers being the wickers, and he was going to grab the Earth in his palm.

"It's been a long time, Willow!"

The vibration amplified, and his fingertips finally reached Zhengzhou.

Then, the hand opened up its palm. The blood was green leaves that were proliferating on the land. Nothing was left in its wake, the evidence of humanity's existence wiped out effortlessly. One of the wickers dived from the sky toward Qing Shui. It blocked out the Sun and aimed at Qing Shui's eyes while he was looking up.

"Hello, it's been a while. You arrived just in t—"

Qing Shui seemed to have lost control of his body and his wineglass dropped.

"Marvelous..."

Qing Shui's word marked the last exclamation of humanity in this city. He was the last voice of humankind here, and his word echoed, representing millions of humans who had existed here.

...

"Qing Shui Li is dead." The clones' word froze Chang. They all spoke at the same time, breaking the silence, as well as turning to the south.

Chapter 138: Those Who Are Deceased, And Those Still Alive

"What did you just say?" Chang's face wasn't able to make any expressions, but his disbelief leaked from his eyes. "What did you just say?"

"Qing Shui Li is dead," Qing repeated.

"It's clear to us, he is dead, completely," Shui added.

"Why? How?" Chang choked and couldn't finish his words. His heart sank instantly.

"Impossible! This is impossible! You are liars!" Jing shouted to the clones, her emotions bursting out. "How can he die? That thick-skinned jerk said he would be the last human to die! How is this possible? You are his kids, and you should stop telling lies!"

"Jing, stop." Chang was almost destroyed by the news of Qing Shui's death. He pulled her hand lightly, gesturing for her to stop.

"Chang, is he really dead?" Jing asked with great emotion, her lips pursed. "How do you know though?"

"He must be," Shui Qing said. "We lost the signal of his life force, which also means that the Willow arrived in Zhengzhou."

"How could he... He is almost almighty... How?" Chang was depressed. He sat down on a tree stump and didn't want to move an inch, his face buried in his palms.

"Chang, you think he is dead as well?" Zhizhi and Sanpang asked again when they realized it wasn't a joke.

"It should be..." Chang nodded. "The Willow arrived, and he hadn't left Zhengzhou. It's... impossible even for him to survive that. And Qing Shui himself told me that he was never an opponent for the Willow. So when he refused my invitation to come with us, he was already dead inside..."

"But... this can't be true!" The rims of Jing's eyes turned red. "He was so bad; he treated me as an experiment subject! How can he die so easily? The villain always survives till the end, he is the guy who should die last..."

"Mr. Li, that powerful figure is dead?" Yin Qing was in shock as well, but in a different one than those who knew Qing Shui in person. In her mind, he was a legend that ruled Zhengzhou and killed Zhuo with bare hands; he was also the developer for many technologies. He was a hero.

A genius like Qing Shui was the last one to die in ordinary people's minds.

However, what they didn't know about this talented mind was that he had a soft heart, and that he was more humane than most people.

"Do you know how he died?" Chang asked the clones.

"We can't be sure; we could never see through his mind," Qing said. "One possibility that I can think of is that he mixed his gene with the Evil Moss's, and then he controlled that with something else so he didn't go crazy immediately. Then, when the Willow swallowed him, it would feel worse than if it had died. He might simply want to torture the Willow."

"But the Willow's so smart, are you sure it'd get tricked?" Shui asked.

"How could it not? It's smart, but it doesn't know everything. It might have learned about the Evil Moss on its way to here, but how would it know Qing Shui's next move?" Qing answered. "We know about the Willow because it is a high figure for us to look up at, and the Willow doesn't know about us because it doesn't need to notice nobodies like us."

"What about Qing Shui? He got a good mind, the Willow shouldn't miss the opportunity," Shui Qing said.

"Well, in theory, the Willow would acquire his brain. But his brain is also poisonous to it; the Evil Moss gene could paralyze it for a good amount of time. I also think Qing Shui would have done some other procedures on himself, like the Modifier and things that we don't know about. He must have done this," Qing said. "But who knows what either of them are or were thinking, right? All we need to do is run, run as far as we can."

"So he might still be still alive..." Jing murmured. "He always has a way to get out of trouble."

"Well, that's hundred percent impossible," Qing said. "Just give up on it."

"Aren't you guys his kids?" Zhizhi refuted. "How can you say something like this about your father?"

"We are just telling the truth." The clones didn't even glance at Zhizhi. "If you want to dig out the reason why he must die, you should interrogate the two people that he truly cares about, not us."

The clones resumed heading north after leaving such words behind.

"Are you coming or not? Although we're sure that Qing Shui is dead, we can't be sure he could stop the Willow," one of the clones shouted out as he climbed over a tree stump. "After all, they aren't comparable in any aspect that we know. Even if he was well-prepared and equipped, the hope for stopping that big guy is still minimal. So stop thinking about him, let's move."

Their figures slowly disappeared in the fog.

Yin Qing was speechless, staring at the clones' backs. From the conversation she just heard, she seemed to realize their identities.

And when she heard what the clones said about their father in such a callous manner, she pinched her kids' ear, saying. "You guys! If you dare to treat me like this, I'll leave you behind forever! Do you understand?"

"I know, I know. Ma, it hurts!" the boy cried.

"We'll never treat you like that, mom," the girl promised.

"Humph! If you dare!" Yin gently rubbed her kid's ear to soothe what she just did to them. "Frankly speaking, I felt weird when I gave birth to you guys, but I love you more with each passing day. You are much more lovable than those little monsters."

"Of course, ma. We are good kids." The boy nodded.

"Oh come on! I'm the good kid." The girl slapped the boy's head. "You are not!"

...

The group caught up with the clones.

Before they would flee at full speed again, Chang smoked a cigarette to suppress his feelings, to bury them at the bottom of his heart.

"All right, let's... go," Chang said loudly, though his voice was

soft. He hugged Jing, whose eyes were still red, then put the backpack on his back, as well as the sorrow in the south.

"They are right, those who are deceased won't come back, and those who are alive should thrive."

Since everyone knew that Qing Shui was dead, the group lost its cheerfulness. The clones were inexpressive to begin with, while Chang decided to immerse himself in his emotions. Jing's eyes were red, but she never cried out. In the meantime, Zhizhi and Sanpang's feelings were undecided.

The group continued to go up north, which was no longer tranquil and quiet. The sensitive animals seemed to know what had happened in Zhengzhou, and they slowed down in their migration.

Therefore, the night wasn't too quiet, given the fact that they were cohabiting with countless animals surrounding them.

Firewood, iron pot, and the biscuit porridge.

They were still eating the same food, but the atmosphere was much more depressing.

The only one speaking was Qing. "We need to be more cautious as we move to the north. The birds are wheeling in the air today, so I guess they're going to settle down here, which also means the Willow decided to stop in Zhengzhou for some reason.

"The land animals may still be dashing towards here, and even if they might have slowed down, they should be right behind us. Our peaceful journey will end when they catch up."

No one replied to his comment, staring blankly at him in awe.

Except for Chang, all the other had turned their heads to Qing—because they didn't understand how could a three-year-old kid analyze the situation in such a cool-headed manner, to the extent that everybody felt that he was heartless.

The dinner finished in silence, and everybody laid down in the darkness.

Chang and Jing felt the most terrible and so no one bothered them.

Some even didn't feel that bad - such as Sanpang. He had only met Qing Shui once, and though he felt sorry for his death, he more rejoiced that the Willow had stopped advancing.

Therefore, he did something inappropriate out of boredom - he peeped at the two-headed kid defecating.

In fact, he was curious about their gender from the very beginning.

"I am sleeping now. Don't forget to wipe it clean," the girl said, closing her eyes.

"Right, right, right. You always get to eat and drink while I can only do the dirty job," the boy mumbled, taking off the pants.

"So it's a boy!"

Because Sanpang couldn't see well, he was actually quite close to where the two-headed kid was. And when he moved, he was discovered immediately.

"What are you doing!" When the boy noticed something was wriggling in the bush, he screamed, "Ma! Someone is peeping at me!"

Chapter 139: The Strengths and Weaknesses of Gigantism

"Shhhhh-" Sanpang jumped out from the bush when he heard the two-headed kid's screaming. "What are you screaming? It's me!"

"Ma! Someone was peeking at me!" The boy kept shouting, and the noise he made also woke the girl up.

She swiftly joined him in screaming and now there were two loud voices.

"Mom! There is a pervert; a pervert was peeking at us!" the girl screamed at a high pitch, and soon she attracted the attention of Yin Qing and everyone else.

However, all were busy with their own thoughts and only lifted their eyes to give an oblique look to the two-headed kid, before looking away once they were sure nothing serious had happened.

Only Yin Qing stood up and approached.

"What's wrong with you?" She hugged her child and looked over their shoulder to see Sanpang standing nearby. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing, I was just worried about them. It might not be safe for them to come here alone." Sanpang changed his expression,

making himself look worried. "See, I can't just let them run around without anyone watching."

"Son, is this what happened?" Ying asked the boy.

"No, he was peeking at us from the bushes," the boy answered honestly.

"Well, I was afraid that I was going to scare them if I showed up randomly," Sanpang explained. He avoided anymore questioned by quickly leaving awkwardly. "That's why I was in the bush. But since you guys are fine now, I'll be heading to my sleeping bag. You know, there's no reason for you to worry about me."

Sanpang ducked into his sleeping bag and turned his back to them.

That night wasn't as peaceful as the previous nights.

Just when Chang was about fall into deep sleep, a bitter smell caught his attention. He didn't think it was a big deal in the beginning - after all, a lot of the insects in this jungle had the same smell.

However, something felt wrong, and he sprang up from the ground so he could distinguish the smell better. His nose twitched to capture more of the scent.

The bitterness initially flew in the air faintly, but then it became

more intense. The smell was almost overwhelming to Chang's sensitive nose.

There could only be two explanations for this: either there was a big swarm passing by, or the newcomer was tremendously huge.

When Chang was sure that the unknown was coming toward them, he woke everyone else in a rush.

"Hey! Wake up! Everyone!" He pulled Zhizhi's blanket away. "We've got trouble, wake up!"

"Trouble?" Zhizhi skin ran with goosebumps from the chill. She sprang up from her place, and immediately the bitter smell almost suffocated her. "Damn, I slept a little too well, I didn't notice this at all."

Zhizhi was guilty about her insensibility. Ignoring it for the moment, she shook everybody in their blankets or sleeping bags while trying to identify the smell in the air. "You're right, we've got trouble, it smells like a centipede."

"It should be a centipede, be prepared to run and fight! Do you feel it?" he asked Jing, who had just woken up, in the end.

"Yes, it's in my detection zone now, about three hundred meters away, and it's fierce." She extracted the information from her senses and said, "Its danger index is about 100. Chang, are you sure you can fight it?"

"I'm not confident, I don't have a proper weapon for it." Chang raised his handgun. "Not with this."

"Then what should we do?" Sanpang asked.

"No need to stress about it, I'll distract it away from you guys." Even if the centipede was unbeatable, it didn't mean Chang couldn't take up its time. Although he was nothing compared to Qing Shui or the Willow, he was a superior being among humans. If he had proper tools or weapons, there would be a chance for him to overcome this roadblock.

"We can go with you," the clones said, wanting to be brought along. "We can help."

"Sure, we'll go together." Chang picked up the clones in his hands and dashed out at his full speed.

The bitter smell was the perfect guide. Chang soon discovered the source of the smell - a gigantic centipede.

The size of the centipede was even more massive than he had imagined. Chang was able to see things in a thirty-meter range, but the centipede extended further than his vision. Though he could estimate its size from its glossy head.

The centipede's body was flat and segmented. Its legs were about four meters long, and as wide as a townhouse. The creature had to

be longer than fifty meters to make it's body proportionate.

Judging from the body, the centipede was much more immense than the millipede that Chang had encountered before. For some reason, the centipede was covered in red and was armored. From whichever angle Chang observed, the centipede was much sturdier than the millipede.

Still, without a second thought, he fired a shot to test it out.

Ping!

The bullet sparked upon hitting the centipede, and sliding a bit sideways got stuck in between the segments.

"Its armor is tough, the resistance is one of the best I've ever seen!"

The shot had successfully attracted the centipede's attention. Chang grabbed the clones immediately and trotted away in zigzags.

The centipede followed up tightly.

"Surprisingly it isn't fast at all." Although the clones were squeezed against Chang's chest, they were still thinking clearly. They even started analyzing the centipede's strengths and weaknesses.

"I agree. In fact, when animals expand their body size to a certain level, they're going to be restricted by themselves." The clones kept discussing while on their bumpy ride. "For example, the elephants and the blue whales, they are largest species on this planet, but they obviously aren't the fastest."

"I also think that the huge body size doesn't provide any benefits to hunting. They just get dumber somehow. Bulking up without weighing the advantages and disadvantages isn't a wise choice."

"Though I think this centipede made a good decision for itself." Shui Qing laughed. "After all, the good thing about gigantism is that you eliminate the possibility of natural enemies. Just like how lions seldom predate on bulls or elephants. The best thing about gigantism is that it improves combat power."

"That why, if Chang doesn't have proper firearms, hurting this guy even slightly is just a daydream," Qing summarized.

"Yo, guys."

Chang was dashing through the jungle, trying to lead the centipede in the opposite direction of where his family was. Even though the centipede wasn't that fast, it wasn't slow either. It was always on Chang's heels and would catch up if Chang slowed down even a bit.

He couldn't help but attract the clones' attention when he heard the whole conversation. "What are you really doing here? Are you trying to help or what?"

"For help, you know us," Qing said. "Should we think of the next move now?"

Chapter 140: Brains and Combat Power

"We were indeed just talking about the strategies we should take to approach this problem," the clones answered altogether.

"All right, all right, keep going." Chang double-checked that nobody was sliding down from his arms and maintained his pace.

"To be honest, gigantism itself can elevate one's combat power exponentially." The clones swiftly resumed their discussion.

"Indeed, gigantism helps species to get rid of natural enemies, and I think that's why a lot of the species choose to evolve this way. Although elephants are clumsy, lions won't waste their energy to bother with them. If we move it to humans, it just reminds me of boxing; you get more benefit when you are in a heavier weight class. The same applies to what we are facing now."

"Though, the bad part about gigantism is that the species will consume a lot, and it takes a lot more energy to predate. They need to supply their energy loss every day," Qing said. "It makes me think of the Willow."

"True, I can only imagine how much energy intake it'll need for its initial expansion." Shui Qing looked at Qing.

"Exactly. But don't forget that it is a plant, it's a lot easier for it to extract and absorb nutrients from a various sources in nature. Not to mention that exploitation ability of possessing human brains," Shui said. "Even if it is the Willow, it'll need to gnaw everything

that it encounters to maintain its size and expand further. But right now we should talk about the centipede, else it might get us killed. The Willow will figure out a way to solve its problem on its own."

"Okay. I think this guy isn't intelligent at all. It has been running after Chang for some time now, and it must have exhausted itself tremendously. I don't think it'll make up the energy gap even it eats Chang," Qing asserted, nodding. "And insects in nature are less intelligent to begin with, so..."

"Do you guys want to try this out?" Qing looked back and forth from one brother to the other, asking for their opinion.

"I think it'll work pretty well, I see 70% chance of success," Shui agreed.

"I disagree, the 30% risk that we're taking doesn't counterbalance the gain," Shui Qing opposed.

"My vote goes with Shui. Trust me, it's worth the risk," Qing concluded. "Two to one, you need to comply, Shui Qing. Chang, put us down."

"All right." Chang hadn't participated in the conversation at all, just listened. He put down the clones without asking more, knowing that Qing would have a better plan than what he was doing now. "I'll be right beside you guys, and interfere only if things will start going astray."

"Thanks." The clones nodded in sync, quietly waiting for the centipede.

The rustling sound was approaching, becoming louder and louder. When the clones thought that the centipede was close enough, they held their hands together. Their eyes gazed at the blood-red fog

At that moment, Chang felt something strange.

Nothing seemed to have changed; there wasn't thunder or lighting, there wasn't fire or storm. The place was absolutely silent, but Chang sensed something peculiar.

There were pins and needles on his scalp, the same sensation he'd had when he witnessed Qing Shui subduing Zhuo.

Although, the sensation was less intense this time.

The clones stood as still as three little statues under the oppressive atmosphere. They waited, watching as the fog rippled and the centipede revealed its new-gained fangs.

"Holy, that's scary."

Upon seeing the centipede's head up close, Chang stepped back instinctively. This mammoth could easily stress anyone out because of its size. And the fact that Chang didn't have anything good equipped left him with zero chance to fight back at such a

close distance.

When the centipede entered Chang's vision, it came at the speed of the chase. However, when it tried to come closer, it seemed to be affected by a strange aura. It hesitated, then moved its head sideways back and forth while slowly proceeding further.

"Are you sure this is how you are going to do it?" Chang's anxiety increased with the decrease in the distance between the centipede and the clones. "I can't save you if it keeps coming!"

No one answered him to sooth his worries.

In the silence, they heard the dozens of footsteps from the centipede. Beads of sweat dripped down from their chins, and their faces flushed.

The centipede didn't seem to have any intention to stop. Chang wanted to interrupt the clones, but he was also worried that he might waste their efforts. He kept himself in a range that he could grab them as soon as he reached out with his arms.

Time stretched out, and Chang believed that every second took a year to pass. The centipede was so close that its glossy shell even touched one of the clone's hair. The green secretion around the rim of its mouth started dripping down to the ground, the acid corroding the soil.

"Are you sure you're still good?" Chang was ten centimeters away

from the centipede's head, its sickle-like fangs having been stabbed into the ground. Everything in front of him messed up with his stomach, and he couldn't resist anymore, he needed to do something.

Because if Chang didn't move now, he would lose all of the clones.

While he was just reaching out with his arms, the clones tilted their bodies.

"Guys, we need to get closer. We can't interfere with its brainwaves from this distance, its armor is too thick. It's harder than I thought it would be to control it," Qing said. "Touch it."

The clones took a step closer so they could put their hands on the centipede's jaw.

Once the clones' hands contacted the centipede, it seemed to have become dazed—the legs stopped wriggling pair by pair.

"Are we good now?" Chang came forward.

Just when he stepped forward, the centipede swung its head up and down violently. In this imminent danger, the clones were about to be squashed into meat patty.

"Watch out!" Chang made a prompt decision at the right moment. He grabbed little Qing Shuis' collars, veered, and leaped

as far away as he could.

Hong!

It sounded like the centipede had just banged its head against the ground.

The centipede turned deranged, banging its head against the ground while swinging the rest of his at the trees, sweeping the moss.

"What did you do?" The centipede ejected some green mist from its mouthpiece unconsciously, and the plants around it went limp immediately.

Chang retreated further with the clones before the green mist could reach them.

"What did you do?" Chang asked the clones again. At this moment, they were all drained and exhausted.

"Don't worry about us. We can't be too far away from the centipede. Otherwise, we won't be able to control it," one of the clones murmured, breathing heavily. "Its own consciousness is fighting against the consciousness we created in its mind, so get us closer."

"We'll probably get poisoned if we are too close to it." Chang went on one knee and asked, "How long is this going to last for?"

"A minute at most. Its consciousness is transient." Qing lifted up his heavy eyelids. "I can feel it fainting away."

"We are almost there," Shui said.

"We are done..." Shui Qing struggled to jump out of Chang's arms, but his legs wobbled and he knelt on the ground.

He stood up again with jelly legs and slowly approached the shambles.

The centipede curled up in its natural form, no longer emitting poison.

"Is it dead?" Chang had never seen a centipede curling up, so he was doubtful. "I thought they never curl up their body."

"Not dead." Qing and Shui left Chang's arms as well. "I can still feel it."

"So were you just controlling it?" Chang followed the clones to the centipede.

"Exactly, this guy is huge, but it's pretty retarded. It's a good subject for manipulation. But our abilities are limited at this age and its armor is way too thick! We couldn't dive into its mind without touching it. I miscalculated, we would've died if you

hadn't reacted fast enough."

"You're welcome." Chang stroked the glossy shell with his hand, then knocked on the half-metered thick armor with a knuckle.

Dong dong dong!

The rattle was deep.

"No wonder my handgun was a piece of crap to it." Chang tried to push the bloody trunk. "I bet it'd make a good bullet-proof material, it's even thicker than a tank's shell! Are you sure you can control it?"

"Of course." Qing closed his eyes and commanded the centipede. "Up."

Just like a robot would, the centipede uncurled after receiving the command.

"This is amazing! We can probably ride it too!" Chang jumped on its head when Qing validated that he could control the mammoth. "It smells pretty shitty, but I guess this will repel other predators. Not useless at all!"

"Indeed. Can you pull us up? We can't climb it by ourselves."

The centipede was two and a half meters in height even while

just lying on the ground. The shell had no indentations at all, so it was impossible to climb up to its back.

Chang jumped down to the ground and sent the clones to the top one by one. After he made sure everybody was on board, a doubt surfaced in him. "Is it going to go mad again? Are you sure we'll be safe?"

Chapter 141: Mother

"You don't need to worry about this at all. The consciousness hedge will cause mania only the first time. Now that we have it under control, it's all good," one of the clones said. "As long as we aren't too far away from it, we can maintain the relative control over it."

"Relative control?" Chang was confused.

"Yes, relative control. We can fight its mind, but we can't replace it - after all, the brain is its," Qing explained. "I know it's pretty retarded, but its brain is still the central control system, the creature executes commands that come from there. What we are capable is to interfere, not replace."

"So what kind of interference can you apply?" Chang asked.

"Well, we told it that we are the same kind," Qing answered honestly.

"We also told it that we are its mother," Shui Qing added.

"Three mothers?" Chang pointed at the clones, bursting into laughter.

"That's correct." Shui nodded.

...

At the campsite.

"Nothing wrong would have happened to them, right?" Sanpang was agonizing about the lives of those who left as he sat by the bonfire.

"Nothing at all. I didn't smell blood from any of them. It's all good." Zhizhi twitched her nose, sniffing. "No one is dead, they weren't even injured."

"Good to hear that." Sanpang heaved a long sigh.

"Though, that being that smells bitter isn't dead either. Interesting! Judging from how their scents mixed, I assume they're pretty close now." Zhizhi frowned. "What puzzles me though is that they all stopped somewhere."

"What is going on?" Yin Qing asked. "Confrontation I guess?"

"Perhaps." Zhizhi was about to nod, but before her chin could go down, an alarming scent reached her. "Wait, no, they're moving, and they're coming toward us!"

"They're almost here!" Jing also shouted out her alarm. "They aren't taking a walk to here, either. The traces of their being are almost overlapping."

"Ha?" Sanpang was shocked, and sweat pulled in his hand. "So the thing is coming?"

"It's coming, so let's move!" They all bolted away from the campsite, and a few minutes later, a massive head entered the area, the bonfire illuminating its massive fangs.

"They all ran away." The scent in the air told the whole story to Chang. "They must have been scared away, I'll get them back."

"All right." The clones nodded, they didn't intend to join as they were exhausted. "But how many people in this group are able to give early warnings?"

"Three." Chang then disappeared in the dark with his answer.

Twelve minutes later.

"Holy sh*t! Damn! Man! Are you kidding me?" Sanpang was jumping around the centipede's head. "What did you do? How can you make it obey you?"

Sanpang slapped the centipede's leg, staring at it in awe.

"Every one of these legs is as thick as my waist! And there are so many! I thought people were just saying stuff, red fog influencing their minds, when they said that these things were tough."

Sanpang was overly excited, and he even kicked the trunk a few times.

The slight vibration of the armor attracted the centipede's attention, it raised its head and turned to the perpetrator.

"Ah!

The grim head terrified Sanpang. He emitted a high-pitched scream, and tripped over his own feet, falling to the ground.

"Don't upset it. Even though it treats us as its mother, it only treats you like its kind. Normally, they don't fight among the group members, but I can't assure that," Qing said while sliding down from the top of the glossy shell.

"Should have told me earlier, buddy!" Sanpang rolled up to his feet, and joked, "Hey buddy, I was just teasing you, please don't be mad at me."

As if the centipede had understood him, it turned its head away from the campfire.

"Oh my god! It ain't stupid at all! It understood what I was saying." Sanpang was overjoyed.

"Is there anyone that's really stupid these days?" Shui also slid

down from the top. "Though I have to admit the centipede isn't smart, it's just not that dumb. It must have sensed your emotions rather than understanding your words."

"However, with this big guy, Chang can finally sleep tonight." Shui Qing jumped off the top and rolled on the ground. "You haven't been sleeping these days, Chang."

"Well, I was half-sleeping, though that was pretty tiring, frankly speaking." Chang laid down near the centipede's side. "I need some sleep now, even though the smell isn't pleasant, but I bet it's the safest place to stay."

He was fatigued, and he fell asleep in almost no time.

Jing grabbed her sleeping stuff and laid down beside him.

Zhizhi seemed scared, and so went back to where she had been staying before.

So did Sanpang.

Soon, all of Chang's friend fell asleep, including the clones. Only Yin Qing's family stayed awake, they were still processing the new information.

All three and a half of them were astonished.

Especially Yin Qing.

At first, she could only tell that this group was special, but she had never accounted for such power.

From the distance that they could march in a day, and their weapons, she knew they were unique since day one.

However, those facts didn't really impress her until Chang told her what happened in Zhengzhou. He seemed to know Qing Shui Li the legend well, and in a personal way. She could distinguish that from his emotions after he heard that Qing Shui was dead.

After she learned about their relationship, she was shocked on a daily basis—the way they could give early warnings, the way they could quantify how dangerous their opponent was. She was already speechless after witnessing those things, but she was left horrified when Chang went out as if to have a walk in a park with three kids and returned having somehow tamed a mammoth-sized beast!

This was against everything she knew about humans. It made no sense at all.

However, the fact was that Chang and his group had overcome the danger that was supposed to kill them—she could do nothing but try to process what was going on. After all, everything that happened proved the hypothesis she had come up with in the very beginning.

Usual, they were unusual. She just wasn't sure why they felt so strange to her. But now she had her own little plan going on in her mind.

"Why don't I just stay with them, enjoying what their presence brings? It doesn't hurt them anyways."

Chapter 142: Delay

Yin Qing was seeking a solution for her curiosity; she scanned around everyone in this campsite, and she locked her eyes on Dr. Huang - the woman that hadn't spoken, the woman that had a low presence.

They were both women with similar age; it should be easy to bring up some common interest.

Plus, Yin Qing found that this woman was somewhat isolated from Chang's group; she seemed to know everyone, but she also appeared to be a stranger.

Therefore, upon making up her mind, Yin Qing moved her bedding and slept beside Dr. Huang with her kids.

In the early morning, everybody woke up and packed their belongings, then they all climbed on the centipede's back.

To this fifty-meter-long centipede, the weight of these human and their belongings was nothing. The group headed to the north again, when everything was loaded up.

The next stop would be Hebi, a medium size city populated with a million citizens, but right now, no one knew the number of the survivors.

The journey was relaxed and comfortable, Chang could even

sleep for a while—the centipede wasn't jolting at all. The countless feet were able to ease out the turbulence, and its bitter scent also hinted its identity of a superior predator which resulted in other beings automatically staying away from them. Their journey couldn't have been easier.

No one was busy except for the clones; they needed to concentrate so that they could keep sending out the signal to interfere with the centipede's brainwaves, as well as guiding their route.

On the other side, Yin Qing sat, holding her kids. She was whispering with Dr. Huang.

Of course, Chang noticed something unusual going on between Yin Qing and Dr. Huang, but then he noticed that they were only gossiping and soon lost interest.

Two other people were sitting at the end of the centipede; they were Jing and Yin Qing's nephew. Both were of similar age and were whispering to each other. Chang felt strange hearing the whispering, but he couldn't hear clearly because he was too far from them, and Jing seemed to be especially lowering her voice.

"What's this? Are you worrying Jing is falling in love again?" Zhizhi sat down in front of Chang.

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried. I don't think she is ready for a relationship yet," Chang said.

"Come on, seriously?" Zhizhi chuckled. "I think your worry is self-serving. Man, you are too protective. Why don't you worry a little bit more if I have a relationship or not?"

"You are thirty-something already; you can take care of yourself." Chang didn't even lift his eyelids.

"Bullshit, I am still young!" Zhizhi's face flushed when Chang mentioned her age. She laid on the side and kicked Chang's waist. "Thirty! I'm only thirty! I'm still in my prime, alright? How dare you say that I'm thirty-something!"

"Come on." Chang rolled over. "Once you pass thirty you are more than thirty years old, am I wrong?"

"You!" Zhizhi supported herself up. "Never mind, you'll never understand a woman."

"Well, you are right. That's why I haven't been in a serious relationship even once." Chang zoomed out, staring at the branch-weaved dome above. "Do you know what I regretted the most when I was still in school?"

"What was it?"

"The fact that I've never fallen in love with a girl." Chang was fret about his past. "I've never regretted not studying hard, but I really wanted somebody to love and for somebody to love me at the same time. The romance of young love can never be found once

you pass that age.

"Unfortunately, I've never had someone love me that much except for my parents. I heard that even Qing Shui had fallen in love."

"Wait... this can't be true, even Qing Shui, that cold-blooded bastard had fallen in love?" Zhizhi felt complicated. "I thought he doesn't even have any desires!"

"Of course he does, Dou was the name of his girlfriend." Chang was reminded of a good times he'd had with Qing Shui, and his face stretched with a rigid smile. "Two years ago, I remember meeting him in the research institute and at that time he showed me a picture of her, and asked me if she was sweet and pretty."

"Hahaha, what a strange person he was! But it was also on that day that I realized he was also human."

"Well, was she pretty or not?" Zhizhi asked — men and women always had a different approach to these kind of stories.

"I'm not sure, that picture was stained and had lost color. I could see the shape of her, but her facial features had faded already." Chang eyes stared into nothing as he recalled the past. "She had a fair complexion and seemed like she loved to smile. Other than that, I couldn't tell more; I don't even know if she is still alive."

"Oh right, Qing Shui wasn't from Kaifeng, he came from

somewhere else, didn't he?"

"Correct, I remember he was from Shanxi province," Chang said. "I have no idea where his girlfriend was from, but I hope she is still alive."

"I hope for that as well." Zhizhi sighed.

"And Qing Shui... where is he now? Is he in heaven? Or is he in the Willow who's disporting with his mind?" Chang heaved a sigh, following Zhizhi.

The centipede was fast, and it was able to keep up the speed for a long time. It could trot on almost any terrain. Since they left the campsite, they had already proceeded for nearly a hundred kilometers. Chang could see the change of the species in the jungle, and due to the temperature drop, the size of the tree leaves started to shrink.

Plus, when they arrived here, the density of animals had increased as most of them had fled from Zhengzhou due to the pressure of Willow's arrival and settled here. They were no longer willing to migrate further as they felt safe in this place. While they were settling down, they were also invading the jungle as predators.

At the same time, they revealed their blood-thirsty nature.

The long exile was a vigorous, energy consuming endeavor to any

species. That's why everyone was hungry, desperate for food.

Billions of birds and insects flooded the jungle, and this would bring massacre to the original residences. A foreign species can break the ecological equilibrium, the invasion of this scale would overturn the original ecology.

When the centipede trotted further ahead, Chang and the others had to begin to stay on guard as they entered the chaos near He Bi.

Quack! Quack!

Some birds quacked and circled above Chang's head, but he didn't fire any bullets, reluctant to waste any.

"There are way too many of them! The Willow repelled organisms from two provinces here!" The birds and insects weaved a tighter web than the tree branches above their heads. "Qing, Shui, Shui Qing! Any ideas to help us in getting away from them?"

Chapter 143: Reverse Evolution

"We have no idea so far; these bastards aren't afraid of us at all!" the clones screamed. "We aren't the almighty Willow - it'd be great if we were! But this centipede doesn't seem to be a threat to them."

"I agree."

Chang kept pointing his gun at the birds without firing. He didn't want to irritate them, but at the same time, he wouldn't allow the birds to take advantage of him either. Therefore, he was fully concentrated on defending. "They're just super annoying; they aren't as aggressive as the species I've dealt with before, but their eyes unnerve me."

"Just keep in mind to not cause injury to them or us. Otherwise the blood will wrack their nerves," Qing shouted. "Or should I say that the blood will drive away their last hesitation."

"I'll try." Some monkeys with wings were circling between the branches; they even held rocks and sticks as weapons. It seemed like they were ready for a surprise attack.

"I have a good idea." Chang jumped off the centipede and ducked into the jungle. "I'll be right back."

He scurried away between the thin gaps among the trees, not catching much attention from the birds. After all, he was all alone while his group was gathered with the centipede. The target size was quite different in scale.

Chang dashed forward for two hundred meters and directed the flock's attention— with a gunshot—to himself, and the birds turned their heads in an orderly manner.

The bullet tore a bird, the corpse splattered in the air, and blood misted and damped the surroundings. This kind of blood bomb couldn't be more irresistible to the ravenous flocks.

He ran right after he shot the poor bird, for one animal was not going to distract the flocks for long enough.

Chang soon shot another bird to create more chaos.

He did so a few times until the predatory vibe grew among the beasts. The flocks went into a mania, plundering the corpses from all directions. Since the initial number of preys was small, many of the birds which didn't get a share of flesh started aiming for their peers. Chang's gunshots ignited the massacre of the flocks, one going against each other.

Later, riots were provoked like fireworks in the sky. The flocks around the centipedes were soon intrigued by the noise; they gave up on their original target and peace was returned to the group of travelers.

Fifteen minutes later, the sky was clear when Chang came back from the battlefield.

"Finally, there is some light." All the leaves on the branches had been bitten off by now. "The jungle is already tightly weaved, and the flocks even blocked the last beams of light we had. Wasn't that upsetting?"

"Don't you have night vision?" the clones stated.

"How do you know?" Chang asked back.

"Your pupils reflect light like cat eyes do. We aren't stupid." The clones again spoke in the same tone. "To be honest, the Modifier worked pretty well for you. We think you have acquired quite an amount of extra abilities. This is a reverse evolution; you're retrieving the abilities of animals towards the root of the evolutionary tree. How capable are you now?"

"I did improve a lot from those practical abilities; I can beat up more than a hundred organisms at my level. However, my body is still fragile compared to my capabilities." Chang recalled the last time he had fought Xin Liu. "Although I have additional abilities, I probably couldn't take a punch from that little amphibia in the face."

"It's a process, Chang. When you start acquiring insects' abilities, your physique will have an incredible boost," Qing said, sitting on the head of the centipede. "Don't ever underestimate yourself, EMs are rare by their nature, and you were modified by Qing Shui in person. Have some faith."

"Yeah, we're all looking up to you. Your potential is still unclear,

which means you may have a larger room for improvement than any of us. You know EMs in perception category are rarer compared to others. And you were enhanced in almost every aspect you can imagine. In some sense, you are one of a kind," Shui encouraged.

"Otherwise, why do you think Qing Shui would have ever cared about improving you? Chang, it's your identity as an EM! He was obstructed by himself when bonding with you and Jing," Shui Qing laughed suddenly, "however, you need to know that you are mighty. The Modifier he gave you was the best out of all he made. Besides Jing, you are at the top of the perception category we know so far."

"Reverse evolution." Chang contemplated on this phrase while walking to the clones. He still didn't let down his guard when coming to sit at the centipede's head.

Their conversation attracted attention from other people on the centipede.

"What exactly do you mean by reverse evolution?" Chang asked. "When the Modifier alters my gene sequence, does it follow some kind of rules?"

"Yes. Imagine this, the Modifier will help you reorder a small part of your genome at a time. In the beginning, it'd be easy as it only needs to alter a tiny portion of your gene sequence and you will acquire abilities from another mammal - as they have the highest similarity to a human regarding gene structure.

"For example, I can see that you are already able to see in the dark like a cat, and that's due to alteration of your genes that control the morphology and structure of your retina. However, can you imagine getting an ant's strength? Ant may seem small to you, but they indeed have one of the sturdiest bodies in nature considering their size.

"To become as strong as them, changes will have to be made to all your bones and muscle structure, as well as your organ arrangements. This is reverse evolution; this is your future."

"..." Chang could only nod.

"But you don't need to be scared or upset. The biggest advantage for species at a lower level is that they are good at survival. It'll take a long time for you to get to that point - you may even stop evolving at some point, we don't know. But isn't the future amazing?"

"If you could divide yourself in half and remain alive like earthworms, you wouldn't need to worry about getting killed easily anymore! Hmm, then we'd also need to think about how to keep your copy intelligent as well..." Qing said. He poked Chang's arm with his elbow. "Son, long way to go."

"Oh come on, since when are you old enough to call me son." Chang patted the three-year-old's head.

"We are older than you." The clones spoke together when Chang

expressed his frustration. "The cells in our bodies came from Qing Shui, and the age of them is almost thirty years old. Therefore, though we've spent less time growing, you can say that we are almost thirty years old already. And that's why the lifespan of clones is much shorter than of their cell provider."

Chapter 144: What About Now?

"You guys are good at upsetting me in every way," Chang joked to the clones. "I mean it, every way."

"Yeah, still, that doesn't change the fact that we are older than you," the clones said in sync.

"How far away are we from He Bi?"

"I think we are almost there."

"Then what should we do with this big guy?" Chang pounded on the centipede.

"I'll look after it," Shui Qing said. "You, Zhizhi, and Sanpang should go downtown to restock our food. We can't stay for long. The migrating animals are just behind us. The city will be destroyed in no time."

"Alright," Chang answered. "What about the centipede? Shouldn't it be hungry by now? We didn't allow it to eat for a few days."

"It's all good, insects are better at enduring hunger than mammals anyways," Shui Qing explained. "Though, I think we should bring it somewhere where it could feed itself. Otherwise, when it's starving, it'll rebel and resist our commands."

"Wait, you can only control it this much?" Chang was puzzled, and his brows furrowed.

"We are its mothers, but its mind is still its own," the clones said. "Qing Shui can take over someone's mind, but we are only capable of influence. That means, we can tell somebody what is right to do, but the judgment of rightness is still its. For example, if we told it to suicide here and now, it wouldn't listen to us."

"I see the difference now." Chang thought for a moment, and then asked, "Why don't we get a being that flies and is big enough to carry us all? Isn't that much faster?"

"Well, Chang, do you know how hard it is to catch a bird with bare hands? Or with weapons without injuring it? It's time-consuming, and we can only influence the mind when it's close." The clones raised their eyebrows. "We have more than ten people here, so it will have to be a big bird or some other thing with wings. Plus, birds are more intelligent than insects, the overall control will be at risk."

"Although, it's not impossible," Qing said after a moment of thinking. "We can try when we are safe, but now let's continue with the centipede."

While they were talking, the density of the jungle decreased.

"I think we're getting close to He Bi." The shrubs were lower and thinner. "You guys stay here, I'll just go in and out the city quickly to retrieve clean water and food."

"Go ahead," the clones told him while sitting at the centipede's head, looking ahead.

"I'll be right back."

"Do you need me to go with you?" Jing suggested. "I can keep guard with my sensing while you search for supplies."

"No need, I'll be quick," Chang replied.

He jumped down and traced the scent of humans, seeking the shortest route to downtown He Bi.

This small town was as crumbled as Xin Xiang, the city they had just passed. The air was filled with the mixture of animal odors and the scents of plants. Chang couldn't see many traces of human activity.

The scent of human habitat led him to the downtown of He Bi.

The urban planning here wasn't the most organized; the residential area was mixed with the government complex. Besides two open stores, other doors on the street were all tightly shut. Some winged animals rested on top of the roofs, while a few more were circling in the sky, as if ready to dive down on an unsuspecting prey at any moment.

Hunting humans wasn't a complicated task for those beasts, and Chang knew exactly what they were looking for. Therefore, he dashed into one of the open stores without making much noise.

"Hey, master! Selling water or food?"

The owner was a middle-aged man, bald-headed. "Food and water?" He hesitated while identifying Chang's accent, which came from the dialect he spoke in the past. The owner also glanced up and down his dirty and wrinkled shirt. "You're not from here."

"That's correct, I came from far." Chang was quite shocked by the owner's swift and correct judgment. "Is that a problem? I want to get some water and food in exchange for my weapons."

"Okay, but I have to tell you I'm not particularly interested in weapons." The owner then asked, "Where do you come from? The south or the north?"

"North," Chang answered honestly.

"Son, here is my idea, let's make a different deal; tell me all you know, and I'll offer you my food and water for free." The owner bent down and pulled out a bamboo basket from below the counter. The container was half-filled with some homemade hardtack and liquefied food in sealed packages.

"Alright. But those are not an equal worth to the information that I can give to you." Chang counted the amount of food in the

basket. "And I'm not alone."

"I have more than you need." The owner shouted to the room behind his counter, and two bald-headed men in camouflage uniforms walked out. "As long as your information is valuable, I'll provide as many resources as you want."

"Really?" Chang soon came to realize that the man in front of him must be the most influential figure in this area. It was pretty evident from the beginning - the man who could operate and maintain his business must be the leader of a local gang.

Judging from the uniforms the others wore, they must have converted from the military to this local establishment.

Now that Chang was aware that they were former military personnel, he told them everything he knew about the current situation, except for the parts involving Qing Shui.

"Can you promise me that you're not lying?" Chang's information blew their minds, and all three pairs of eyes were left incredibly wide.

"It's real, but it's up to you to believe it or not." Chang ignored their expressions and added, "I believe you'll have a good sense of judgment whether to buy my information or not. But keep in mind, it's hard to make up the amount of information I just gave you."

"By the way, how long can the food be stored?"

"About three days and a half," the leader said.

"All right, I'm looking to get food for ten servings to a group of ten people. Then we'll be even." Once Chang said that, he didn't wait for the bald man's response and started picking up the food.

The owner took a step back, his eyes shadowed. "How should I call you?"

"Liu." Chang's hands continued stuffing his backpack.

"If possible, can you come with me to the military station? We need to verify the authenticity of your words," the bald man said with a straight face.

"It's not possible, unfortunately," Chang refused immediately. He had no time to cooperate with any investigation.

"What about now?" The bald man still spoke calmly, but this time with his gun pressed against Chang's back.

Chapter 145: Hide and Seek

"Nope," Chang said, even though he felt a tingling sensation in his back. He raised his hands over his head.

"Oh well, you don't really have a choice right now." The cold muzzle dug into Chang's waist. "What you just told me sounds critical to our survival. We have to verify the authenticity of your information. So it's not a threat, but you have to come with us."

"Bro, listen. If you're smart enough to believe me, you should understand that neither of us has time to waste. Though that Willow is resting temporarily, the migrating animals are right behind our backs. Time doesn't permit me to provide an explanation," Chang said, hands still raised high above his head. "Is that how you treat a benefactor who just offered life-saving information to you?"

"It's not up to me to decide how to treat you, we just need to verify..." The bald man insisted, but he couldn't finish his sentence. The next moment the pitch of his voice, as he said the word 'verify', quickly rose to that of a shriek.

"Ahhhhh!"

The cracking of the thigh bone preceded his scream. His knee snapped and bent backward at the most impossible angle, and he pulled the trigger in reflex.

BANG!

The bullet flashed above Chang's waist, as he bent forward due to the kicking momentum. The bullet even ripped a thin piece of skin off the back of his head before rushing into the void of the red fog.

Chang regained his balance before anyone had time to react. He straightened from his bent position, and with a scalpel in his right hand sliced open the other soldiers' windpipes - before they could pull the triggers.

Problems were resolved, nice and clean. Chang shook his head, flicking a few drop of blood away. He took the backpack with the supplies he just asked for and prepared to leave the store. It'd be hard for him to leave if he delayed, the guards ought to have started gathering right after the gunshot.

Just as how he predicted, while he was securing the strap on his backpack, a small troop emerged. They didn't even care to investigate if their allies were in the store; they chose the most destructive method of eliminating enemies - by indiscriminate shooting.

"Are they even the military anymore? I'd say they've become thugs already." Chang sneaked another piece of hardtack in his pocket, then broke a window on the other side of the store and disappeared within the thick fog.

Some individual from the special force noticed his figure and chased after it. At the same time, the warning signal started howling at the roof of the store.

‘Once each city formed its state, the military has become much more efficient, and their sense of danger improved. They’re less humane as well, they no longer need to worry about any political consequences for killing the wrong target.’

There were many thoughts in Chang's head as he dashed away from the store. The amount of guards grew significantly, like someone had spilled some beans. The warning signal also disturbed the birds circling in the sky, their flight patterns broke apart as they impatiently ascended and descended.

At the suburbs of He Bi, Chang’s group was waiting for him with the massive centipede.

Chang galloped along its side, from its tail to the head. He shouted at his friends, "Go!Go! Go! I caused some trouble in there!"

"What trouble?" Qing patted the centipede, which wriggled around and then ducked into the forest.

"Words I said caused a riot." Chang sighed. "I thought I was doing a favor by telling the military the truth, but they insisted on verifying the information. I had no other choice but to kill them and flee."

"That sounds like something you would do." Shui giggled.

"Indeed, always pays for his own unnecessary kindness," Shui

Qing added.

"I assume no one is after us, right?" Zhizhi sniffed the air, worrying.

"No. Who could spot me in this void anyways," Chang said. "I'm not bragging about anything, but who could match my tracking and anti-tracking abilities?"

"I get it, of course. We shall resume our journey to the north." Zhizhi almost rolled her eyes.

"Yep, to the north." Chang then added in a murmur, "Those migrating animals will eventually scatter, they'll find comfortable spots and stay there until they feel the threat coming again. The further north we get, the less dangerous it's going to be. I'd say when we pass the border of He Nan and get to He Bei province, we should start thinking about slowing down in a relatively bigger city."

"I agree with you," Qing said, but his eyes lingered on the birds. "Look at the f*cking flocks here... How scary..."

A gigantic bird descended towards Qing, its mouthpiece was wide open, ready to pick him up. However, he dodged in time to avoid the huge animal.

"Wait, why are you using foul language already?" Chang was perplexed by Qing's words. "How could you say it in such a natural

way? Qing Shui never cursed."

"Qing Shui is Qing Shui, and I am me," Qing emphasized. "I know, I know. Even if we have the same cells, my mind is different from his, completely. I think I need to repeat it though, I have my own personality, and it is independent of his."

"Exactly, we are even different from each other." Shui curved his mouth into a smile. "Don't treat us like somebody's copies. We have our own emotions and thoughts."

Shui Qing affirmed their statements by nodding. "Among us, Qing is most prudent while I am more adventurous. Do you see it? We are different."

"Alright, alright. Keep going with what you said before." Chang pressed his fingers to his temples.

"Right, I was going to say that I agree with your thinking about the Willow. Without its intimidation, the migrating animals will soon disperse. The weather up north will be more extreme, as it gets colder and colder. After all, they aren't us, they don't have a long-term goal of escaping from the Willow once and for all. They will stop somewhere, eventually."

Qing waved off a few insects away, as he spoke.

"We're going to get to He Bei province soon enough. And the next mega city is Shi Jia Zhuang. We'll see what we can do there,"

Chang said reluctantly. "After all, we're all exiles now."

"We don't have a choice in that."

Before the group could enter He Bei province, they had to pass through An Yang. There they heard some terrifying news.

"There is a jungle between He Nan and He Bei provinces. Nobody ever gets through it." This was a kind advice that Chang received in exchange for a piece of hardtack.

"It's a vast jungle. The diversity of species there is unimaginably rich. Most of them are experts in camouflaging as well. They're so good that even if you stand in front of them, you won't be able to tell. A lot of people from He Nan died in that jungle when they fled to He Bei, from which we barely hear anything. I advise you to just stay here instead of taking the risk."

The advice rang an alarm bell in Chang's head but he didn't slow down even a bit.

Traveling with the centipede accelerated their pace, and soon, they arrived at the intersection between the two provinces, and a pink jungle was right ahead of them.

"This must be the jungle that person in An Yang talked about. He said it will be a hide and seek game in there all the time." Chang stood upon the head of the centipede, worriedly looking at the pink horizon. "Everything there has the same color, pink. Even I

won't be able to tell the direction in such a monochrome space."

The jungle gave a weird sensation to Chang, as if he was suffering from the snow blindness. The color pink tinted every scenery. He felt nauseous and dizzy after just a moment of staring.

"This is gross... The pink doesn't even have values; the edges of everything melt together, I can't even see the trees! It hurts my eyes more than redness and darkness." Chang jumped off the centipede, taking a step into the pink world. "I can't see."

"This is... something we never saw too." The clones slid down from the head of the centipede. "Monochrome basically equals blindness to us. The creatures there are competing homogeneously."

"What do you mean?" Chang was puzzled.

"Essentially, when all species are evolving towards one direction in a certain ecological circle—for example, an island—they choose one trait, like poisonousness. Then there, if anything is not poisonous, they won't be able to survive." Qing gazed at the pink world ahead. "And this jungle that is playing hide and seek with us, it's a world of camouflage; nothing can survive if they stand out from the surroundings."

Qing pulled up a strand of grass when he spoke. He rolled it between his fingers.

"Just like this grass, it looks like it is grass. But in fact..."

Qing flicked at the stalk's pointy tip, and the grass convulsed as if it felt pain. It started twisting and rolled out its leaves into wings, turning into a moth-like insect that fluttered its wings and flew away.

The kid lost sight of the moth before even realizing that it was gone. He then finished the sentence that he had left open previously.

"...It's an insect."

Chapter 146: A World of Monochrome Pink

"The place is intimidating," Chang commented. "My visual enhancement doesn't help me in any aspect. I feel like I've gone back to the time when the red fog first arrived. I see nothing but the red."

"Besides"—Shui caught up from the back—"Brilliant camouflage consists of multiple elements. Smell the air, listen to the wind."

"Oh?" Chang's nose twitched, detecting the particles flowing in the air. A stream of tacky sweetness caught his attention. He knew what it was, and he remembered what its host did.

The leaf structure was bizarre though, almost all of them were in a roll shape - as if they were trumpets. If wind passed through them, they would blow out a deep sound. On its own, that sound was quiet, but when there were dozens of them, any other noise would be covered entirely.

"It's barely noticeable, but it decreases the transmission of other sounds. This plant is not only emitting sound, but also absorbing it."

Shui Qing picked one trumpeted-like leaf from the shrub in front of him and spoke through it. As expected, the microfiber in the leaf roll absorbed most of the sound wave, reducing his volume significantly.

"This jungle... We can't pass through it, can we?" Zhizhi, Yin

Qing, and Dr. Huang slid down from the centipede one after another. Their footsteps were hesitant when they came closer.

"I'd say it is impossible..." Chang said reluctantly. "We'll be basically blind and deaf once we go in there. Not to mention how well the species in the jungle are capable of camouflaging themselves. We will have to be prepared for a sneak attack every second in there.

"Wait a moment." Chang paused as if he had thought of something. "Jing, how about your detection ability? Can you still sense anything?"

"I can." Jing slid down from the centipede, eyes closed. "The jungle is rich with life, the density of it almost higher than what I can handle, but I know where those lives are, every single one of them."

"What a relief." Chang breathed a sigh of relief. "I guess we can make it through as long as we're careful enough."

"No worries." Shui took out the compass. "With Jing and compass as our eyes and ears, we can make it."

"We also need to stay close together, so that Chang can see us. That way we'll be able to go through with minimum trouble," Shui Qing stated with excitement. "Once we pass the jungle, we'll be arriving at He Bei province. And this jungle is a natural barrier against the migrating animals, so we'll be able to slow down once we have it behind us."

"Indeed, this place is both a disaster and fortune at the same time. Let's try it," Chang said. "Jing, shall we?"

"Now you think of me." Jing's face loosened up at Chang's word. For the longest time ever, she hadn't felt valuable or acknowledged. "I know that you can't leave me."

She climbed back on to the centipede, shouting, "Come on, guys!"

"Coming!" Chang sprang from the ground up on the animal.

The centipede's shell was smooth and reflective, so as soon as it slid in to the jungle, it looked tinted with pink.

When they went in deeper, unlike what they saw outside, the color here was more saturated - red, blood red.

The camouflage color of this jungle mixed well with the fog. Everyone, including Chang, lost their sense of direction. They had a taste of what blindness felt like.

Although the fog outside of the jungle blocked sight, it still allowed to see the contours of buildings and objects - Chang could still see the outlines of the world.

However, here - he could see nothing. His retina enhancement lost all of its advantages.

RED! RED! RED!

Except for everyone's clothing, Chang saw nothing besides the color red.

"Damn it! I hate red," Sanpang stated while stomping on the centipede.

"I didn't hate it before, but I've changed my mind now." Yin Qing's thoughts drifted away and she asked, "Are we going to die here?"

"How should I know?" Sanpang felt pins and needles on his scalp. In this monochrome world, 'death' was the last word he wanted to hear about, for it was keeping close company with them. So he elbowed Jing, who sat beside him, eyes shut. "We aren't going to die, are we?"

"How would I know?" Jing was interrupted and her body tilted to the side. She frowned. "Stop interrupting me. It's tough enough just trying to identify what is in here given the density. Please stay away from me."

"Ha! I thought you're good at what you do," Sanpang said. He had a rough idea what Jing was capable of, but she never talked much of it. "You can sense living organisms almost effortlessly, so what can't you identify? I..."

"Sh*t!" Sanpang was about to lecture Jing, but he was lifted in mid-air. His face turned pale and he screamed out, "Help! Sh*t, help!"

"Everybody!" Chang was fully alarmed. As soon as he witnessed a tender branch wrapped around Sanpang's waist, he sprang up and started shooting at its upper part.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

The "branch" snapped in two. The part around Sanpang's waist loosened, as if it had lost its life. It also bled, the color of it the same red as everything in the jungle. The scene froze.

Sanpang dropped onto the centipede's solid shell.

"I said don't bother me." Jing took a glance at Sanpang, her emotion warring between blaming him and worrying about his safety. "Are you okay?"

"I'm not okay!" Sanpang struggled to scratch a wound on his neck. "That thing, when it caught me, it inserted something in me. It hurts! I... I feel unhappy, ahhhhhh..."

Sanpang blinked a couple times, stammered, and then his pupils rolled up so the white part of his eyes dominated in his eye socket. This change was absurdly sudden. One moment he was speaking naturally and the next he started convulsing.

"Poison?" Chang dashed to Sanpang, almost slapping his face. "Sanpang, Sanpang, look at me! Here!"

Chang moved his index finger in front of Sanpang's face, attempting to get him to focus on the motion. However, the man ignored his finger, or more likely, he just couldn't see it.

"Dr. Huang! Please come! Do you know what's going on here?" Chang called the doctor to come forward.

Truthfully, even before her said her name she was already climbing towards Sanpang.

"It's not poison, it's the creature's digestive juice." Dr. Huang conducted a rough inspection, then explained, "I don't know what exactly pricked him, but that thing injected its digestive juices into his body. The liquid is highly acidic, and it almost destroyed Sanpang's nerve system along with the spine. That's why he's convulsing now."

"What can we do about it?" Chang flipped Sanpang over to see that the wound had been liquefied by the acid already. A strange smell rose from the hole.

"Nothing. We can do nothing. Even with proper medication and medical equipment, it would still be hard to treat." Dr. Huang waved her hand. "The acid corrupted his whole spine, which will be gone very soon...There is nothing we can do. All I can suggest is that..."

Dr. Huang's eyes shifted back and forth between Sanpang and Chang. She didn't finish her sentence.

Yet everyone knew what she was unwilling to say - give up.

"Really?"

Sanpang was still convulsing badly, it seemed like he was still lively - but the motions were twisted and irregular, as if he was a fish out of water. He was struggling intensely, but he wasn't far from death nonetheless.

"We can do nothing about it." Dr. Huang looked away.

"Let's dump him," the clones who were 'driving' the centipede stated all together. "In that case, we'll end his pain, and he won't be a burden to us. Shoot him and throw him away. Otherwise, this will do no good to any of us."

"..." Chang sighed and took out a medication box from his backpack. A syringe of tranquilizer was emptied, and Sanpang soon was calmed.

"You're wasting our resources," the clones told him, but they said no more.

Chang didn't refute but turned his attention to Jing. "How did you not notice that branch?"

"I just didn't. I can't tell if it's because the homogeneity here makes it hard to identify things or if it's just too good at camouflage. It's hard to tell everything apart, and even harder to collect all these similarities and sort out what is coming and what is not."

Jing felt full of bitterness and sadness. Her face wrinkled when she tightly closed her eyes, and the tip of her brows stretched upward. Sanpang was new to the family, but he was close to Jing, with whom he spent most of his time. Thus, she felt the worst among the group about what had happened.

Chang understood the emotion underneath Jing's skin, but he didn't say anything, just hugged her from the back, then quickly drew back to leave her some space.

"Bro... I never thought of this day..." Chang's fingers ran around Sanpang's wound. "You look so much like a good friend of mine from before. Yet he at least managed to write a letter while you can't even say anything. You remind me of a friend that I knew from school, Tao. He died soon after the red fog arrived, all of a sudden."

Chang fondled the finger bone pendant hanging around his neck.